

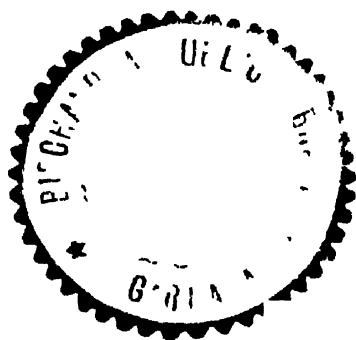
There is No Refuge

At the age of seventeen Mandy Brown's refuge was her Evangelical faith, a faith which had been recently crystallised by adult baptism. God filled the abyss created by her mother's death; God was the escape formerly provided by her gay, pleasure-loving father; the rainbow-coloured life of dreaming Australian summers, her secret child's world.

Mandy was confident her faith would be proof against the assault of a wider life at the Sydney university. Her love for Keith Dane was on a strictly spiritual plane, but she gradually became aware of the physical passion stirring below the puritanical skin. Almost overnight Mandy is plunged into a world of free thought, of free love: she begins to live wildly, talk freely, drink, jazz her religion, live a life of 'sin'. Had she found her answer?

GWEN KELLY

There is No Refuge



HEINEMANN

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PART ONE

Blue Sky and Gold Sun

The wind lifted the curtain and it billowed into the room in a scurry of flimsy muslin, yet the window was open no more than two inches from the cracked brown wood of the windowsill. 'It's a gale outside,' thought Ann Brown as she pulled the blankets higher around her chin. She glanced down at the baby lying in her arms and instinctively tightened the shawl across its tiny chest. What a funny, scrawny baby it was. And after such a long time too. Her fourth daughter. She had not picked a particularly comfortable time to be born. Ann shivered. She would have to get her mother-in-law to close the window. This August morning of 1922 was grey and cold in spite of the coal fire stacked high in the fireplace. She watched the flicker of the firelight on the wooden walls, the parallel lines of painted wood leaping into light and fading into shadow with the rise and fall of the flame. She held the baby closer to postpone the moment when the window would have to be shut altogether, the moment she dreaded. She hated closed doors, she hated closed windows – she wondered if Mandy would feel that way about things too. Mandy – how difficult Reg had been. Amanda was a lovely name; slightly old-fashioned, but original. But somehow Reg could see nothing in it. She had been faced with one of his immovably obstinate moods.

'I don't like it,' he said, 'I just don't like it. You can have Mandy if you wish. I can tolerate that. But I'm not giving any more of my children outlandish names. After all, I allowed you to have Catriona and Lyndon.'

'But Mandy's not a proper name,' she had protested; 'it's an abbreviation. You can't call the baby by an abbreviation.'

He shrugged his broad shoulders, ran his hand through his prematurely grey hair. He said, 'Well, it's Mandy or nothing. Take it or leave it.'

So Mandy it remained. He was to register the baby that morning. Mandy Joan Brown. She hugged the little dark head to her.

'To me, my darling,' she said, 'you are Amanda. I don't care what he says. If I were on my own two feet, I'd register you myself.'

Lyndon Brown, aged seven, looked through the bars of the old double bedstead at her mother. The room was just the same, the two shiny brass knobs on the ends of the bed were just the same. That's what Nena always called them: Charles's head.

'Look out,' she would say, 'here comes his Majesty's head! Swoosh!' and the lovely golden ball would tumble over into her lap. But of course they only did that when Mumma was out. Mumma could spank hard when you annoyed her and the last time they had forgotten to wipe their fingerprints from the ball when they finished. Lyndon touched her bottom tenderly but it no longer hurt. She pressed her face harder against the brass bars. Everything was the same: the thick white quilt, 'the soft muslin curtains, the flickering flame, the gas mantle in the corner.

And yet Lyndon felt terrible, all horrible inside. They had promised her a new baby, someone to play with. When Catriona and Nena were busy there was never anyone to play with. She twisted a synthetic curl around her finger and looked at the bundle in her mother's arms. She was filled with a sense of disappointment deeper than any she had ever known. What was the use of that ugly, red-faced creature. New sister, bah! It couldn't even walk. And her mother lay there all day and nursed it. Even in its cradle it stayed in the the room beside Mumma's bed. Perhaps Mumma wouldn't

love her any more, perhaps even Nena would love the baby better than her.

She placed both her feet on the lowest rung of the bed and, grasping the cross-bar at the top, she rocked the bed with her hands. Ann Brown endured the sickening motion patiently for a moment but she was tired and far from well.

‘For heaven’s sake, Lyndon,’ she said at last, ‘what are you doing?’

Lyndon burst into tears.

‘I’m trying to annoy my new baby sister,’ she said as she ran weeping from the room. She was right. Her mother didn’t love her any more. It didn’t matter if the baby annoyed her. She mustn’t annoy the baby. The faintly moaning bellow that always accompanied Lyndon’s tears receded down the hall. Ann Brown looked wearily at her mother-in-law who gently smoothed the covers of her bed.

‘She’s going to be difficult, isn’t she, Vicky?’

Victoria Brown smiled, her soft blue eyes strengthened by the sparkle of humour in their depths.

‘Give her time, Ann. You can’t expect miracles. After all she’s been the youngest for seven years – it’s a big shock you know.’

She bent down and started poking the fire, watching the ash and the half-burnt coals shudder down into the waiting ash-pan. She was much more worried about Reg than Lyndon but she could hardly tell Ann at the moment. She liked her daughter-in-law and she knew Ann loved her, but on some questions Ann was obstinate. Reg was one of them. She had tried tentatively to raise the subject a couple of days earlier but Ann had brushed the half-question away.

‘Reg hasn’t been well since he had the ‘flu last year, that’s all. There’s no need to worry.’

Did Ann really think it was only that or was she trying to

protect him? With Ann, Reg always came first no matter what he did...

Nena Brown was in her seventh heaven. She loved babies, she loved the tiny wrinkled bundle lying beside her mother.

'Can I stroke her hair, Mumma?'

Ann smiled up at her thin brown-eyed daughter.

'Of course, darling,' she answered.

Nena felt the softness of the hair with the tip of her finger. Her body glowed with sybaritic delight.

'Oh, Mumma,' she said, 'it's just like black silk. It's as lovely as your best frock. And isn't it long?'

Ann laughed.

'Very long,' she answered. 'Quite odd for a baby.'

Nena smiled too. Then nodded gravely.

'Not odd, Mumma, our baby couldn't be odd. Just remarkable.'

They looked at one another and laughed.

Nena left the bedroom and walked along the hall. She turned into the room she shared with Catriona. She was sure she could hear someone crying but there was no one in sight. Only one person in the house could sob with such noisy intensity. She knelt down and raised the quilt of her bed.

'Come out, Lyndon,' she called. 'I can't possibly crawl in after you.'

The rotund heap in the darkest corner near the wall gradually unfurled. Nena put in her hands, caught the chubby wrists between her strong brown fingers and pulled her heart-broken sister the rest of the way.

'Go away,' said Lyndon, drawing nearer in spite of her protests. 'Go away. You don't love me either.'

Nena put out her arms and drew the dishevelled bundle to her. She understood at once. How thoughtless she had been. For the first time in seven years she had spent twenty-

four hours without once thinking of Lyndon. Lyndon had been her baby, her very own. Nena was six when she arrived and she had absorbed her from that moment. Lyndon was hers, one of the things Catriona couldn't have. She had spent six years as Catriona's younger sister, but with Lyndon she had a little sister too. She had shown Catriona just how a little sister ought to be loved. She wasn't bossy or demanding. In a way her whole life was devoted to Lyndon. With a sense of guilt she hugged the child to her.

'You know I love you, Lyndon, you know I do.'

'Best of all,' Lyndon said greedily.

'Best of all,' said Nena.

To punish herself, to recompense Lyndon, she vowed she would not visit that darling black-haired baby again that day. Not once. It would be the hardest punishment she could give herself. God would help her to keep it . . .

Catriona pushed the long straggling lock back from her brow. The wood fire was hot and even though it was August she was sweating. It was the strain. She wished her grandmother could have stayed home this afternoon. When grandma was there everything went smoothly, even breakfast and that, thought Catriona ruefully, was saying a lot. If only Dadda didn't come home too soon or too late it would be all right. The meat was coming up the straight, the potatoes were beginning to look that lovely crisp golden brown that he liked, peas were simmering gently with just the right pinch of soda. They would be as green as the spring grass even though it was the middle of winter. She still had the gravy to make and she prayed she could create the thin deep brown liquid that he demanded, no tell-tale unbroken lumps of flour, no betraying black specks floating on the surface.

Catriona sighed. She had loved her father all her life, the

gay charm that could turn an everyday world into fairyland, the sense of humour, the generosity that had strewn a childhood with bags and bags of sweets, armfuls of toys. But even at the best of times he was difficult about food. 'Personally', thought Catriona, 'I'm going to marry a man who can't cook. Then he won't know when things taste bad.' Breakfast before Grandma Vicky arrived had been a nightmare. She had posted Nena in the hall, as otherwise she couldn't get his bacon and eggs on the table at exactly the right moment.

'He's putting on his collar,' Nena would whisper through the door and his egg would go into the pan, into its sizzling bed of butter.

'He's coming down the hall,' Nena would pipe, slipping behind the door so that he couldn't see her and she would take up the egg lifter so that the egg would slide gently on to his plate as he tucked his serviette into his waistcoat button. But lately he was not only fussy; he was downright bad-tempered. Ever since he was sick last year he never seemed to want his dinner at night. He just muttered and pushed and said things under his breath like 'chops again'. She knew Mumma was worried about it. Nena had been difficult that evening too. Usually she wanted to wait on Mother, but tonight it had even been a struggle to get her to take in Mumma's basin of water.

'God will punish you if you make me break my promise,' she said, looking mysterious, but Catriona had insisted. She was sick of Nena's personal alliances with God. Finally Nena had gone, with shut eyes, the basin of water perched perilously at the end of her outstretched arms, muttering some incantation that Catriona couldn't catch. She tried so hard to help Nena. Why, oh why, was she always so aggressive to her? Catriona closed her eyes and thought of her unfinished homework. The baby was lovely, of course, but it was not all

fun. She opened her eyes. The flour for the gravy was beginning to burn. At the same time she heard her father's key in the door. A large tear began to roll down Catriona's daintily freckled white nose . . .

Victoria Brown faced her son across the dining table, her lovely face stern. Nena and Lyndon had gone but a weeping Catriona sat huddled on her chair.

'You've no call, Reg, to upset the child like that when her mother is ill.'

'The gravy was burnt.'

'What about it? Surely you've tasted burnt gravy before in your life. I can't be here to superintend things every moment of the day.'

'Catriona's fifteen. She ought to be capable of keeping her mind on the job for a few minutes at a time. It would be different if it were French. Her mother was married at eighteen.'

Victoria Brown moved her hands impatiently.

'I was married at sixteen and bore eleven children including you, Reg Brown, and I wouldn't personally recommend the process to anyone. It's time you behaved yourself.'

Reg felt uncomfortable. Every since he was a small boy he had feared his mother's disapproval, partly because it was always so controlled, compared with the violent rages of his father. As children they grew used to the broken chairs and china that followed in the wake of their father's anger, but he never personally lost the feeling of shame that his mother's reproaches aroused in him. It wasn't fair. She had no right to attack him now. His head was aching. He missed Ann. He did wish Catriona would stop snivelling. The gravy had been burnt, it upset his inside. The self-pity welled within him.

'I feel sick,' he said.

'Fiddlesticks!' said Victoria. 'You're no more sick than I am.'

'I've been sick for months,' he protested. 'Ask Catriona.'

'Nonsense.'

Catriona looked up with interest.

'He really has, Grandma,' she said defensively. 'Ever since last year.'

'There you are,' he said triumphantly.

Victoria Brown smiled kindly at Catriona.

'You're a good child,' she said. 'Now run to your room and get your work done.'

She waited until she heard the door close behind the girl. Then calmly and firmly she faced her son, no hint of humour in her blue eyes. Perhaps she was to blame, perhaps she had given too little time to this son who had been cleverer, more charming than all the others. Yet it had not been her fault that he had been sent to work at eleven. He had his school certificate and with ten others to feed they needed the money. She had done her best for all of them. She had given them a good Christian home. There had been no strong liquor at her table. But Reg was weak. In her heart of hearts she had always known it. As long as everything went his way he was all right, but let anything upset his little universe and he was done. She was sorry but it could not go on. He would have to face facts for once.

'You're no more sick than I am,' she said. 'You've been drinking, Reg. You've been drinking steadily for a year.'

He rose with a roar of indignation, red in the face.

'Nonsense, Mother,' he blustered. 'I'm ashamed of you. What do you know about drinking, and you a good Baptist?'

'If I'm a good Baptist, it's because I've needed to be, son. There was plenty of sin in my home, don't you worry. My own brother died of alcoholism – your Uncle Jim. That's why I've tried to keep it away from you. Apparently I've

failed. All I want to say now, Reg, is this: drink yourself to death if you want to, but don't come home here afterwards brow-beating your wife and children.'

Catriona, her ear pressed to the door, caught her breath in a sob. She didn't believe it. Daddy didn't drink. Grandma was wrong.

'What did she say?' said Nena.

'I couldn't hear,' said Catriona. 'I couldn't hear at all.'

Up to three years ago Reg Brown was proud of his achievement. Of all his brothers he was the one who had been the most successful. He had left the long brown-painted building of Camperdown School for the last time at the age of eleven, his school certificate tucked under his arm. Because he had done so well his father and mother did their best for him. He was not sent on the trams like his eldest brother nor into a packing department like the second eldest.

They had settled him with Mr Renshaw, importer of German goods. It was true that he had started at the bottom, messenger boy, jack of all trades, but what was the harm in that? It had never hurt him. And the job gave him good opportunities for a bright boy to learn accountancy as well as the business. And he had made good. Right to the very top, Mr Renshaw's right hand man, his trusted friend. He remembered his first pay envelope. Most of it had gone to mother, of course. but he had used the remnant to buy a bit of fruit for the family and odds and ends for the babies. What fun they had had opening the parcels. He loved the joy of bringing something home, of watching their faces as the gift, however trifling, fell out.

He recalled, too, his first big step on the promotion ladder. He was eighteen and realised he was not in a position to marry Ann, lovely brown-eyed Ann who lived five blocks away in Stanmore. Ever since he was fourteen he had known Ann and ever since he was fourteen he had loved her. Yet their first meeting had not been auspicious. He had been on his way to the train, very smart in a new pair of trousers, stiff white collar and straw boater.

Suddenly a mouthful of spittle, well aimed, landed right on the centre of his immaculate shirt front.

'Got him,' said a girl's voice followed by a hastily suppressed giggle from another girl.

He turned to see two of them sitting on a paling fence, watching him warily, their black-stockinged legs hanging indecently over the palings.

'Who did that?' he asked angrily, mustering what dignity he could. 'You needn't think you're funny. I'll tell your mother, if you don't watch out.'

'I did,' said the elder, a somewhat fierce-faced youngster. 'And telling mother won't help you. She wouldn't care anyway.' She poked her tongue out at him.

'Wouldn't she?' he said, beginning to be really angry, then his eyes lighted on the younger one. She was small, brown-eyed and elfish and she smiled.

'We're sorry,' she said. 'We've been watching you for weeks. You always looked so starchy, marching off to work in your white collars. We didn't mean to hurt you.'

'That's all right,' he said, suddenly uncomfortable. 'I guess I asked for it.'

'Oh no,' she said, 'it wasn't that; I wanted to meet you, that's all and - well - Margaret did the rest. She aims better than me.'

That was the beginning. From then on he saw Ann regularly. By the time he was sixteen he knew that she was the only girl he would ever love. Every morning on the way to work he posted her a letter in the box on the corner of the street, a real love letter in the style culled from the most popular romantic fiction of his youth. And every evening after tea, he put on his best grey suit and went to see her.

They were gay years between 1900 and 1914. They had worked long hours, but they had also enjoyed themselves with boating picnics on the Lane Cove River, church picnics

on the foreshores of the harbour, Saturday afternoons at Balmoral. It was because of their efforts too that the youth of today had such good working conditions. Those early days in the Labour Party had been exciting. The years of construction!

By the time World War I broke out Catriona and Nena were seven and five and he was renting a house in one of the northern suburbs of Sydney. He was proud of that. He was the first of his family to take the big step of moving out. It was Catriona who led to the change. Ever since she was a baby she had suffered from bronchitis, winter after winter. 'You must get her away from the city,' the doctor said. 'This air's no good for her. Something higher.' And so they had come to Fernleigh. At first the gums had swept up the gully to their very back door, while the roads were a lovely red, yellow ribbon of dust. He had clutched Ann's arm in delight at his first sight of the comfortable wooden house, set in its garden of trees and rose bushes, around which pretty Catriona and laughing Nena were already romping.

'It's ours, Ann,' he said; 'to make or to mar. I feel I've found home at last.'

And they had. The church, the P & C, the tiny social round. They were caught up in such a wonderful whirl of activity they had no time to be lonely, not even to miss Margaret or Grandmother Vicky. Everything had gone well. Catriona had recovered – well almost – and Nena, thin by nature, was transformed into a brown, wiry little tom-boy. Nena could climb a gum tree with the best of them within two weeks. It gave her a refuge, a haven where no one else could intrude and Reg had always recognised that the over-tense, restless spirit of Nena had needed a refuge. A refuge. Was there a refuge for anyone? He kicked at the kerbing as he passed. What was gone wrong? Was it his fault? He had not started the world war, the war that knocked the bottom

out of the German importing business and sent G. B. Renshaw bankrupt. By 1920 the firm had had it. It was in 1916, he remembered, that Lyndon had been born. His thirtieth year. 1915 had been a big conscription year and even though he had a wife and two children to support, plus just about all Renshaw's employees, it had seemed a good idea to be on the safe side, just in case the bill, in spite of Labour opposition, went through. And so Lyndon was born. Perhaps in some ways he was disappointed that it was another girl; any man likes a son, but not as much as some people thought. As far as he could see, his daughters were just as good, in fact better, than most people's sons. He felt a pride in their glowing looks, their sensitive intelligence.

In 1920 old Renshaw died, bitter, reproachful and quite insane. He did not even get a reference out of him. It was true, having no heir of his own, he had willed the business to him, but in the circumstances that was hardly a recommendation. The personal attack had hurt him most. He pushed from his mind the old man's taunts and reproaches. Someone had to be the scapegoat he knew, but he did not wish to think about it. Then he had gone down with 'flu himself in the big epidemic. After he recovered he found it impossible to shake off the depression that had at first swallowed him on Renshaw's death. He had begun to drink a little, to cheer himself up. This tectotal nonsense was all very well, but a little hurt no one. It was easier to forget about the war and Renshaw with a couple of whiskies to warm his belly. Mother was wrong. He had no intention of becoming a drunkard. He just didn't feel well. Everyone had been good, he supposed. He was only thirty-four, they said. Quite easy to start again. A young man. But they were wrong. It was not easy. He had been working for nearly twenty-five years, twenty-five wasted years. In all that time he had known no

other walls than Renshaw's, no other routine. On his brother's advice he had drawn out his savings, borrowed a little from the bank and set up his own accounting business. Ann was enthusiastic. Everyone thought he was doing well.

He wasn't. He was going broke. Somehow soon he would have to tell Ann. How could his mother understand? Father had worked in steady uninspiring jobs all his life. And there was Nena, Nena who wished to leave school. 'Let her run wild,' the doctors said; 'put a bit of flesh on her bones.' But in a few weeks she would be fourteen. Ann felt she had run wild too much already. Wasn't that why she hated school? They could send her, Ann said, into his office, then she would have something to do and he could see that she wasn't overworked.

What could he say? Catriona was his adored one, his darling, but Nena was his companion. Nena could do a cross-country walk with him and never utter a word, the companionship of perfect silence. Nena would sit beside him at the local cricket matches however boring. She knew as much about spin bowling as he did. She could have placed a field with the accuracy of a man. Perhaps he could pretend to Catriona that all was well even if they worked in the same room, but Nena would know even if she virtually saw nothing. Nena would know and say nothing, but both he and Nena would be aware of their knowledge. He didn't want it to happen, but equally he didn't want to tell Ann the truth.

If only that wretched horse had won on Saturday. Joe had assured him it was a sure thing and he had placed fifty pounds of the firm's money on it. Somewhere within the next twelve months he had to raise an additional five hundred. He couldn't see how to do it.

The doors of the hotel swung open, letting out a flicker of yellow light and the noisy, pushing, companionable noise of drinking men. He'd have one and then go home, shake off

this absurd depression before he faced Ann and his tiny new daughter. He elbowed his way in and struggled to the bar.

'Hullo Peter, hullo George.'

'Hullo Reg.'

The glow of fellowship ran through him, warming him, sustaining him.

'Name it chaps,' he called, jingling his change in his pocket. 'This one's on me.'

'Good old Reg!' They laughed. 'Can't beat old Reg for a shout.'

The familiar glow quickened his pulses. It was like the kids again. He loved their faces when they opened their parcels.

An hour later he set out for home.

By the time she was twelve months Mandy's world was a kaleidoscope of impressions, feelings and sounds. The love of her mother, Catriona and Nena wrapped her in its blanket of security. Already she adored the grey-haired man who held her against his rough shoulder whenever her tiny world crashed in disaster, already she sensed the essential enmity of Lyndon, an enmity expressed in tiny tugs at her cot net as she passed, a frightening contortion of face behind her mother's back.

Most of her world was seen at floor level for she could not yet walk. Her eager hands explored the green carpet embossed with pink roses for pieces of fluff, droppings of paper, anything at all which she carefully transferred to her equally eager mouth. Already her world was enhanced by her delight in the furred creatures who roamed through it with her, especially Jock, the dog, who sat by her cot and lifted his shaggy head to her tiny embrace. Neither of the words, Mum or Dad, came to her lips first but Jock. He was her most settled point of security, the pivot of her comfort, outside the emotional tensions and hysterical thunderbolts that whirled and eddied above her dark head.

Across the carpet she could see the tail of Bubba cat, grey, gentle, unprotesting, a creature whose soft neck was as pliable to her touch as the rubber rattles strung across the end of her cot. In triumph she raised him from the floor, four feet dangling, a kitten with a permanently attenuated neck. Usually it was Lyndon who rushed up and pulled back her clenched fingers, often with unnecessary violence, from the little animal's neck.

'Look, Mumma, look. She's killing Bubba cat, I tell you. Why don't you do something?'

But Ann, again pregnant and burdened with an anxiety that stalked her night and day, shrugged wearily.

There were days circumscribed by the walls of the old brown box in which her mother dumped her while she did the washing and she let the shining smooth pegs slip through her fingers as the steam from the tubs and copper spiralled around her. They were the moments of delight, timeless; spaceless, her father's coat, the green carpet, the shaggy dog, the spiralling steam.

But already Mandy was afraid. The shapes and forms of darkness crowded at night into her consciousness, part and parcel of her terror, her fear of a disrupted universe. Against the pettiness of her own frustrations, her spirit beat in rage. They were moments only, but they returned in recurring patterns of annoyance. They were personified by the stumpy gum at the bottom of the garden that she was never allowed to reach - her unexpressed El Dorado, the deep-red Japanese vases that lay on the black carved sideboard beyond her exploring hands. In vain she screamed and banged her head in masochistic vengeance on the floor. And the pettiness of her own frustrations crowded in and became engulfed by the terror of insecurity. She strove all day to keep the corner of her mother's dress in the corner of her eye, but whatever care she took, there occurred the inevitable moment of absence, when the front gate closed on Ann, whisking her away into a world where she, Mandy, could not follow. Time ceased, fear touched the edge of her consciousness and flowed over into the deeper recesses of her mind, till they lifted her bruised and weeping from the floor. When Ann was absent she always knew. Even when she fell asleep, soothed by Ann's hand on her soft hair, she knew immediately from the moment of waking if Ann had gone, even

before they came into the room to dress and comfort her.

Her fears were intensified by the unexpressed feelings and storms that broke in waves across the household. Because her family could love they could also hate and sometimes the unexpressed fear, the repressed anger, gave way to manifestations of violence over trivial incidents. For some reason Catriona seemed at variance with most of her family that year. With her leaving only a few months away she resented her mother's pregnancy, Nena's superior position as a worker. She relieved her overtense feelings by trying to boss Lyndon, to force her to take a greater part in the routine household tasks, but Lyndon, reinforced always by Nena's protection, defied her.

And there was also the growing tension between Mandy's best loved family, her father and Nena. In vain Ann ordered Nena to be polite to her father. There existed between them an unspoken problem that simmered beneath the surface all the time. As Reg had feared, their mutual companionship was in danger. It was simply a matter of waiting for the moment of betrayal.

The day of the Sunday-school picnic, the quarrel burst literally over Mandy's head. The moment of truth might still have been avoided if Nena had not, as usual, left everything to the last moment. Already by eight a.m. Catriona was ready, her frock fresh and starched, her black hair neatly braided, her sandshoes shining white, cleaned the night before. Nena had risked it. A good sun at six a.m. would dry her shoes by eight, but the morning dawned grey and cold with a sky that hovered on the brink of an imminent drizzle. Reg was already up. He was getting breakfast for Ann that morning as she was far from well. He was a good cook, for genius lay in the broad spatulate strength of his fingers. He



could whip up anything from bread to Christmas cake with the basic sense of ingredients that scorned a cookery book. But as usual he had drunk too much the evening before and the familiar ache clouded his head and combined with the depression that inevitably recurred with the cold light of morning to produce plain bad temper.

He had lit the oven early so that it would be ready to keep warm the crisp rolls of bacon. He opened it only to find his daughter's sandals residing on the middle shelf. He knew they were Nena's, the daughter whose accusing eyes watched him each time he left the office for the afternoon at the races or a few drinks at the pub. Picking up the offending articles he flung them across the floor and put in the bacon. When the eggs were ready he called them to breakfast. Mandy sat in her high chair between Reg and Catriona who, starched and white, kept her eyes firmly on her plate, conscious of the shoes lying on the kitchen floor. Lyndon too watched with anxious eyes. Nena was late which did not improve Reg's temper. She was still braiding her hair in front of the mirror muttering about Catriona's vanity which meant she could never get a look in the glass at the proper time. 'Vanity, vanity, all is vanity and vexation of spirit,' said Nena, while at the same time her father pushed at his egg and muttered about the ingratitude of teenage daughters.

As Nena came into the room Catriona felt her bacon stick in her throat and Lyndon gave a nervous gulp. Only Mandy continued to bang her spoon happily on the tray of her high chair. Nena went to the oven, saw it was empty apart from the toast and bacon, then looked at the shoes on the floor. Without a word she placed the food on the floor and put the shoes back into the oven, then walked to her place at the end of the table opposite her father. With a roar that shook the house Reg rose, plucked the shoes from the oven and threw them out of the window. Returning to the table he grasped

its edge, shaking with rage, facing his daughter across the white table-cloth.

'How dare you!' he yelled. 'How dare you! You little hussy, I'll teach you.'

But Nena was also shaking with rage and unlike Reg she had inherited the streak of pure violence that ran through the quick-tempered members on the Brown side.

'Don't you touch me or my shoes, you drunken sot,' she said quietly, too quietly.

Picking up her tea, scalding hot, she pitched it straight for his face, retaining the empty cup in her hand. Catriona looked up to see a solid body of liquid passing over her head and snow-white clothes. Its force carried it over Mandy's head who, looking up terrified, began to beat her head and scream. Lyndon gave one bellow and fled from the table as the hot tea hit Reg across his nose and mouth. He collapsed into the chair, clutching his face and moaning.

The general uproar brought Ann to the door. Each member felt a moment's guilt as they looked at her tired brown eyes, over-large in the thin face. She put her arms around Reg and faced Nena.

'What have you done to him?' she asked. 'Can't I have a morning in bed without this fuss? One day you'll kill someone with your wicked tempers.'

The tears began to run down the girl's face, but even though Ann's distress was her most vulnerable point she was not beaten yet.

'I'm sick and tired of his bad tempers,' she said sulkily. 'Sick and tired of them. I have him all day at the office too.'

'Don't talk about your father like that,' said Ann severely.

Reg lowered his hands from his burning face.

'It doesn't matter, Ann,' he said. 'They don't care. I'm just their old father who gets breakfast for them.'

A gleam of almost reluctant contempt lit Nena's eyes as

she glanced from one to the other, her father's face weak with self-pity, her mother's unrelenting, non-understanding in her stubborn love for him. Shame at her own anger mingled with her resentment.

'All right, Mother,' she said. 'I'm sorry I've upset you. But why don't you tell her, Father? Why don't you tell her the truth? Tell her why I can't stand you any longer. I'm not going to work for you any more. I've had it – and so have you. Go on – tell her. I dare you.'

Crying she left the room.

Ann turned to her husband.

'What does she mean, Reg?'

Spurred on by pain he knew the moment he dreaded had come. Perhaps it was not such a bad moment. Ann was still sorry for him.

'She means, Ann,' he said, 'I'm broke. Broke to the nines. I'll have to sell the business and get an ordinary job. We'll be better off anyhow. After all I'm a good accountant and wages are not too bad at present.'

Ann was not as shocked as he had imagined she would be. Her stalking fear had at last caught her. She felt unexpectedly relieved, almost grateful to Nena for bringing the matter to a head. Perhaps with the worry of the business off his mind, he would stop drinking, become again the man she had loved before 1921.

'Poor Reg,' she said, 'I'm sure you did your best. No one will blame you. It was the war. Now let me see your face. She really is a naughty girl.'

Not until his face was oiled and dabbed with preposterous ghostlike patches of flour did either he or Ann remember Mandy. They found her, head bent over the tray, fast asleep, worn out by fear and exhaustion, the remnants of breakfast and spilt tea splashed across the table cloth in front of her.

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And so the light and shade flickered in uncertain patterns across Mandy's life. By the time she was three some of the old fears and frustrations had gone, only to be replaced by others just as terrible. She now had Caroline to play with, a fair-haired, snub-nosed mite who toddled along in Mandy's wake. In fact, by now Mandy had forgotten there was ever a world where there was no Caroline. She was as constant as a shadow.

Mandy's daytime world was made up of Ann and Caroline interspersed with Lyndon, but most of the time Mandy tried to forget that Lyndon was there. Lyndon loved Caroline, her disappointment in Mandy obliterated by her joy in the tiny new baby. Mandy had supplanted her, Mandy was a useless baby, but Caroline was a delight, a real live doll for her to enjoy. A feeble flutter of jealousy disturbed Mandy's being as Lyndon came into the room and said.

'Come on, Caroline. I've got something to show you, just you.'

'Me too.'

'No, not you,' pushing Mandy away. And Caroline taking Lyndon's hand would trot away with her, leaving Mandy crying and beating her head on the floor.

It was unfortunate, too, that events tended to deepen the gulf between herself and Lyndon instead of bridging it. There was the matter of Lyndon's dog. Jock had been run over some time back and they now owned a red cattle dog, but someone had given Lyndon a pup of her own, a tiny brown creature with soft brown eyes. Mandy loved it. Whenever Lyndon wasn't looking she played with it, cuddling it, exploring its entire anatomy with the curiosity of a small child.

Ann did not want the dog. They had Laddie. They had Tom Cat and Mumma Puss. She took Mandy as an excuse to get rid of it.

'We can't have her handling the dog like that,' she said to Reg. 'It's unhealthy.'

So she gave it away to Bill the Chinaman who brought the vegetables.

'You know they eat dogs,' said Catriona maliciously to Lyndon who had been rude to her that afternoon, as the old Chinaman's wooden cart rattled down the road with the little dog on the seat beside him.

'Don't be silly,' said Ann, but Lyndon began to cry, genuinely terrified. Yet her anger did not have Catriona as its object but Mandy.

'I hate you, Mandy, I hate you,' she said. 'They're going to eat him and it's your fault.'

Mandy stood with troubled eyes, apprehension undermining the pit of her stomach. She only understood in part what was happening, but she did understand the words 'eat him'. She loved the dog and she knew Lyndon loved it too. Running to the gate she shook it frantically, trying to get out, to chase the Chinaman down the road, to bring back the puppy, but no one took any notice of her. All her sisters were sorry for Lyndon; and Ann, half guilty, had walked inside.

Yet in spite of her sorrow the days were patterned with delight as well. The sheer joy of living that had created the love of Reg for Ann highlighted existence, swung the pendulum of their lives from hell to heaven. There was the joyousness of birthdays and Christmas, the stockings filled with gifts, the tables weighed down with food. Grandmother Vicky always came for Christmas now that Grandpa was dead and the sweets and nuts and cakes, the pork and ham and poultry became part and parcel of an inexplicable delight of which she was the centre. Mandy loved her. She was part of the wonder of Christmas, a symbol of goodness.

Then there was the enjoyment of sing-songs around the

piano, Sunday nights, when Catriona beat the keys through the hymns of Sankey and Alexander and their clear sweet voices rose together in a harmony that created out of melody the ivory palaces and silver chords of Beulah land, while she and Caroline danced round and round the green rose embossed carpet until they tumbled over in a fatigue of delight.

There were the local fairs with the tinselled kewpies and the galloping merry-go-rounds, the sticky, saccharine pleasure of fairy floss, the spinning chocolate wheel. Perched on her father's shoulder she missed nothing. At every game of chance he had a go, and darts flew, balls clicked in a roistering madness that made of living a coloured noisy dream.

Finally there were her own particular pleasures with her father alone. Now that Catriona was grown up he transferred to her some of his affection for his eldest daughter. When he went out he quite often took her with him, her tiny hand grasped by his broad firm one. Evening after evening she accompanied him to the billiards, so that Mandy's passion for 'bullyards' became a joke with everyone.

Inside the hall she would sit quietly on the benches at the side, chewing the cudless sweets he always provided, while the white balls and the red rolled across the verdant lawn of cloth. Ann's feelings on the billiards, however, were quite different. Silently she watched her treasured possessions disappear in an agony of resentment. Her silver tray, her Dresden shepherdess, all went to pay his bets as his money for the evening ran out. She said nothing until it came to the Japanese vases, then she stood in front of the sideboard, as fierce and determined as her sister, Margaret.

'They're mine,' she said.

'But I promised,' said Reg. 'I bet them on the last game. It's a debt of honour'

'Dishonour, you mean,' said Ann.

'But what can I give Joe?' he asked. 'There's nothing else.'

'Then you'd better find something,' said Ann.

The embarrassed Joe looked from Ann to Reg, thoroughly discomfited.

'It's all right, Mrs Brown,' he said. 'Reg can pay me some other time.'

But when Reg finally returned that evening Ann did not speak to him and soon, to Mandy's sorrow, there were no more trips to the 'bullyards'.

Reg was now working regularly again, but Ann was nervous. The first year, after he sold the business, was a precarious one. No job seemed to suit him. No sooner had he settled in than he would leave. Once he had even been asked to leave. Ann never found out the whole truth but it appeared that he had been missing from the office for days on end. Yet he had been in his current job six months now, so Ann felt hopeful. He was still drinking but everyone thought it was not as bad as it had been. Life too would soon be easier. Catriona had almost finished her teachers' college course. She had wanted to go to university, but in the financial chaos at the end of her Leaving year it had not been possible.

'You can go at night if you wish,' said Ann. 'This way you'll be earning in two years. In my day no one would have thought of keeping a girl at school until she was eighteen.'

Nena, too, was starting a short teacher training course awarded on her Intermediate. Ann hoped it might solve a few problems there. Why did Nena blame her and Reg for letting her leave school? She had wanted to do it, hadn't she? And a girl of fourteen ought to know her own mind. She admitted now it had been a mistake to send her to Reg's office. But then, how was she to know? Reg had told her nothing; Nena had told her nothing. Still, she mustn't be

critical. Nena was such a generous girl. So like Reg. She always bought the best seats at the theatre when she took her out and she made a point of taking her out regularly.

'Even if she borrows from me to do it,' thought Catriona ruefully, jealous of Nena's spendthrift popularity.

The pendulum swung and Mandy's world became more coherent daily. Her greatest comfort was still her father who never laughed at her night terror but lifted her out of bed to the warmth of his rough shoulder. In spite of growing security, the absence of those she loved still frightened her. At Lyndon's school concert they had to take her home. It was certainly a treat for a four-year-old to be allowed to go. They sat upstairs in the picture show with a good view of the stage. The dances, the recitations, the songs delighted her. Lyndon was in the play.

'My word, she's good,' said Catriona.

'Of course she is,' said Nena.

'Where?' said Mandy, 'where's Lyndon?'

In the massed bunch of children on the stage she could find no Lyndon. She was enjoying herself so much, laughing at the antics of a little black boy but she thought they were people in another world.

'There,' said Nena, 'Lyndon's the black boy. Look, she's running away from the little girl.'

Terror struck her. She did not want Lyndon to be black. She did not see how Lyndon could ever get back home again. Even teasing Lyndon was part of her world.

'It's not Lyndon', she said to convince herself. 'Lyndon's white like me and Mummy.'

Reg laughed.

'No, she's not,' he said. 'She's turned into a black boy. Look, there's her bangle. You watch when she moves her arm.'

And Mandy could see it. Lyndon wore her bangle every-

where and there it was dangling from the black boy's wrist. And so she screamed, screamed because she feared witchcraft had taken one of her family away from her.

Reg took her home, walked with her back and forth along the footpath, his pipe jutting above her head, till she ceased to cry and lay asleep in his rough-coated arms.

'Trust Mandy to spoil the concert,' said Lyndon, but secretly she was a little flattered that Mandy's fear had been for her.

The summer before Mandy turned five, Ann decided to buy the house in Winter Street. Reg was working, Catriona was working. They could easily raise the deposit and there was no future in rented houses. Reg was, at first, doubtful. He was not too sure about his present job. He didn't like the way the manager spoke to him, but with his natural joy in spending he soon became infected by Ann's enthusiasm.

'Old Peters is a rogue,' he said. 'Half the stuff he's putting up is jerry built, but this place is a bargain, a real bargain.'

It was not hard to raise a small mortgage. Peters did that for them. The return payments were moderate and so on the eve of 1927 they moved for the first time into their own home.

That house became the centre of Mandy's life. Years after it would haunt her dreams. At night lying awake in other houses, in other places, it would again spring to life before her eyes, its long line of windows, glass doors and deep cool verandas. It would seem to her then that she had never lived anywhere else. It alone was the ultimate reality, all else was a dream. Years later, even after she had lived in a dozen other houses, she could still recall the feel of its woodwork, the patterns worn into the planking on the veranda, the tiled glaze around the fireplace, the grassy graduated sweep of its land gilded with the ineffable magic of childhood. It was a comfortable spacious house and all her life she was to remember the pleasure of waking in the wooden room, that opened reassuringly into her parents' bedroom. Through the open casement window she could watch the early morning sunlight flicker through the leaves on the gum tree straddled across the footpath outside the house next door. For years she was to remember the comforting driving rain beating on the tin roof, rain that hung from the wire-netting strung along the side veranda, in pendulous shining drops.

The garden too became for her a permanent memory of scent and colour. She could never in later years pass a pittosporum tree without the sweet pungent odour of the white blossoms taking her back to the cluster of trees near the front gate in Winter Street, trees that the Browns refused to cut, even though they tangled with the new electric light wires. They were their trees and so they stayed.

Electricity was the new thrill of the period. They had been in the house only a short time when the little white gas

mantles disappeared forever. And within a year or two the old-fashioned steam trains that served their line gave way to the caterpillar-like electrics. With most of the town she and Caroline watched, their noses pressed against the white railings of the station while the new brown monster slid in and out of the platform. Secretly, however, Mandy was glad that they lived on a line where the express trains still ran through, pulled by the black living steam engines. The new electrics never gave her the same thrill of fear as the gleaming tracks, pulsing with the weight of the expresses as they thundered down the hill. Still she liked going to town by the new trains.

If they wished they could vary the trip by going down the North Shore line. There was then the excitement of clambering out at Milson's Point to catch the harbour ferry across to Circular Quay. The Greycliffe disaster, however, ruined this route for Mandy. The picture of the tiny ferry cleft in two by the big *Tahiti* filled her with a fear of ships that haunted her for years. She refused to go to town by the harbour route, she screamed every time they went to Manly by ferry, the turbulence of the waters rolling in from the Heads kindling a turbulence of fear in her soul.

These, however, were the years of blue sky and gold sun, the glory of childhood lending a halo to existence. They were filled with delight for Mandy by the family next door. The house was occupied by a woman called Southey, a gentle, pretty, untidy being, whose floors always smelt of stale urine. Her husband was a long, dark lean man who hailed originally from England.

'I was born with the snow piled against the door, yet my birthday falls in summer. How's that?' he would roar, pulling Mandy's dark plaits.

Ann took a protective interest in the gentle, ineffectual creature who was his wife. She had two children, then a third,

born after they came to the house. Mandy and Caroline, who had no babies of their own, were fascinated. Half the day they spent in Southey's sliding down the bamboo with the older children, helping Mrs Southey give the baby his bottle, first milk, and later arrowroot biscuits reduced to a thick lactic pulp. In one corner of the room was a phonograph, cracked and uneven in tone. The only record was 'The Bells of Saint Mary's' which they played over and over, its tarnished, sentimental sweetness becoming part of the atmosphere. Mandy was happy in that house, its careless, slovenly ease, the inhabitants, rougher in speech and manner than her own family, attracted her. Mrs Southey allowed them to live in her home as if they belonged there. They walked with her in the afternoon, pushing the old wicker-work pram in turn. They ate snacks from her kitchen table. They tore around her grounds with complete abandon, innocent, erotic, yelling at every appropriate opportunity, 'I see your bum,' with the bells of St Mary's ringing in their ears.

And as Mandy merged from babyhood to childhood her sisters also grew, passing into a world of adult pleasures of which Mandy and Caroline had only a glimpse. Hovering uncertainly in between was Lyndon, the recipient of too many adult confidences by her mother, jealous of all affection bestowed on her, clinging hard to Caroline, her own object of unadulterated love. Most of the time she and Mandy tolerated one another. At times she spent hours trying to amuse both small girls, making them dolls' clothes, thinking up games for them to play, games that were so long in preparation that Mandy and Caroline lost interest even before they began. These occasions usually brought Lyndon and Mandy into opposition for as a rule it was Mandy who lured Caroline away with some game of her own.

Yet, when Mandy started school, the long mile walk with

Lyndon through the bush drew them partly together. Mandy discovered a new thrill. Before others Lyndon could be proud of her.

'Spell cat, Mandy,' Lyndon would say and Lyndon's friends would close in an admiring circle to hear her perform. This temporary alliance, however, did not last long, for Mandy hated school. At home her own world called her, peopled by her own fancies, her own games. And at home Caroline stayed with Mumma. Mandy hated leaving Caroline, she was part of her existence, and she hated leaving Ann. Some of her old terror still haunted her. How could she be sure Ann would not go away while she was out of the house? There had been that Saturday, that awful Saturday when Ann had her hair cut. Egged on by her father's protestations Mandy had been sure Mumma would return shorn like a man.

'Your beautiful hair,' said Reg. 'It would be criminal to cut it. I can remember showing your photo to old Bill at the office the day we got engaged. "What hair, Reg," he said, "What wonderful hair. You've picked a beauty, my boy".'

But Ann was adamant. The new bobs and shingles attracted her. Both Nena and Catriona had followed the fashion. Let Reg sulk.

He not only sulked. He stormed in a rising crescendo of self-pity up and down the house. And so Mandy too screamed and wept and tried to prevent her mother leaving the house. Yet when Ann returned she found to her surprise that she liked it. The soft fringe framed Ann's face, accentuating its brownness, the width of her lovely eyes. Still it was change and she did not like change. Any change, all change was to be dreaded. What if Mumma went away while she was at school?

Every morning she felt sick. If that failed she clung to a branch of the pittosporum tree in the front garden with a

grip strengthened by desperation until her mother finally let the howling, protesting Lyndon depart.

'I'll be late, I'll be late,' she wailed and Mandy knew that if she could last only another minute Ann would give in. Six months later Caroline came too and she immediately felt much better. Part at least of her security now accompanied her.

In the summer of 1929 Lyndon started High School and became a unit in a bigger newer world. She travelled in the train and wore a uniform. Now Lyndon aspired to greatness. She felt important, grown up. There were moments when she hated Mumma for still treating her like a child. Fancy expecting her to visit the butcher's shop at Central on the way home. Other girls didn't have to do things like that. Lyndon felt the beings of her new world received their meat in mysterious ways but never through a vulgar butcher's shop. Still there was no gainsaying Ann. She had a quick hand that did not believe that teenagers were automatically exempt from a slap on the buttocks, so Lyndon, swallowing her shame, went. How dull her world was, how commonplace. Why wasn't she treated like Catriona?

Catriona. The jazz age spun into its mad whirl of parties, hectic living, on the edge of which Catriona fluttered like a somewhat puritan butterfly. The short, ugly, boyish styles accentuated her youthful girlishness, the shingle suited her dark straight head, lighting up her creamy white skin and grey eyes. Catriona had boyfriends. Mandy and Caroline, eyes pressed to the keyhole of the lounge room, giggled with delight as the lean young man with the crooked nose popped a cigarette between Catriona's well-shaped lips and lit it for her.

'What would Dadda say?' whispered Mandy. 'Or Grandma Vicky? Ladies don't smoke.'

'Mumma does,' whispered Caroline. 'I saw her take one out of Catriona's drawer. Catriona doesn't know.'

Dadda said a lot when Catriona spun out to dance in a red backless evening frock. Her vertebrae glistened beneath the creamy skin.

'The devil's got you now, my girl,' said Reg. 'You mark my words. You'll be the ruin of all of us.'

Catriona smiled maliciously. 'Only one thing ruined you, Daddy dear, drink and the gee-gees.'

Then she was surprised to see the hurt spring into his eyes. He deserved it, didn't he? He had been drinking too much for years. Every since that night when Grandma - Catriona, conscious of the rightness of her accusation, was curiously insensitive to the sensitivity of others. She was, however, an amazing girl. Now a university student, teaching all day, taking notes half the night, she still found time to flirt and dance. But she was a reluctant sinner. In those years when youth went wild and sought to ignore the pointlessness of existence in a gay round of parties, alcohol and promiscuity, Catriona remained at heart a scion of respectability. Reg had no real cause for fear. Catriona would not in time remain a Baptist, but middle-class conventions with a good dash of puritan morals were branded on her soul. She was destined for the Anglican Church and with marriage, children, she achieved her goal. As she played the organ in the little Baptist church at Fernleigh her being felt no qualms or cation at the words of the hell fire evangelists. Adult baptism embarrassed her. Her new university friends laughed at such practices and even though some of the simplicity and purity of her inherited religion remained with her for life, its forms and creeds demanded too much from her.

With Nena it was different. For two or three years religion moved her deeply. At the time when she should have been

dancing she was praying, throwing away her youth in a fervour of mystical devotion. Catriona irritated her and she irritated Catriona. Her spontaneity, her conscience-ridden dutifulness, her core of obstinacy were foreign to her elder sister. Yet she remained a favourite with her younger brethren. When she went away to teach in the country, Mandy waited anxiously for the postman, for the little slips of blue paper, the tiny letters just for herself, the letters that began 'Dear Fairygirl'.

Drink and gee-gees. The change to Winter Street had not as Ann hoped brought peace to Reg. Patterns of living do not necessarily change with the patterns of material surroundings. The frustration in Reg's soul did not disappear with the new house. With the affluence of simply had more money in his pocket to drown his dislike of the men to whom he had to sell his labour. As he changed from one job to another he felt a greater need to retreat from the problems of living. As he ran into debt he drank to avoid the accusing eyes of Ann, the knowledge that Catriona and Nena were needed to finance the household. On Saturdays he ran away to his cricket match leaving Lyndon and Ann at home, sometimes without a penny to spend on their own enjoyment. Ann in the foolish belief that children were a restraining influence sent Mandy and Caroline with him.

And Mandy loved him. The Saturday afternoons, fresh with the clarity of spring or drowsy with the heat of summer, became the mecca of her week. She loved the trip in the train: inside, the comforting warm male smell of her father, outside, the vista of blue-grey gums and grey-green wattles.

But her mother was wrong. Her father did not stop drinking simply because he had his two small daughters with him. He bought them sweets and comics, set them on the see-saws and swings, then left them for an hour at a time while he filled up in the hotel. Without fully understanding, Mandy was

protective of him. She knew the Saturday evening quarrels between her mother and father were connected in some way with her Saturday afternoons. When questioned by her mother she denied that he left them, but the constant tension pulled her feelings like a wire strung between two badly cemented posts. There was her father, her dearest being, the one to whom she pledged her loyalty; and her mother, the pivot of her security, the one she could not do without.

The repercussions on the parental plane were also effective in producing changes that she never fully understood. All her life they had been Baptists. Then suddenly they became Methodists. Mandy never did comprehend the reasons for the change. She was sitting by the fireplace fiddling with the splinters of wood left over from the fire. They were very rich people who had a wonderful house in the country. She tied her handkerchief around the prettiest splinter. 'Mrs de Sylvester,' she murmured, 'walking across her estates,' and she trotted the little sliver of wood across the tiled hearth.

The glass doors to the drawing-room burst open and Catriona rushed in her grey eyes alight with anger and shock.

'Mumma, Mumma,' she called. 'Guess what he's done now.'

Ann came in from the kitchen smoothing her white apron.

'If you mean your father, Catriona, he has a name.'

'For heaven's sake, Mother, stop worrying about trifles. Wait till you hear what he's done. We'll have to leave church. I can't face them any more.'

'Good God, Catriona,' said Ann. 'Will you stop acting the martyr and tell me what's biting you?'

'There you are. I told Burley you didn't know. I'll die of shame.'

Burley was the new Baptist minister, young and enthusiastic with a penchant for Catriona. As Reg was church

treasurer that year, Burley had a good excuse to visit the Brown household constantly.

'Know what?' said Ann. Mandy caught the inflection of fear in her voice that Catriona missed and looked up warily from Mrs de Sylvester. Catriona began to weep.

'Daddy used the church funds to pay his gambling debts.'

'I don't believe it,' said Ann.

'It's true,' said Catriona. 'Whatever you believe. Burley's had no salary for two weeks. He's been covering up for Daddy that way. What'll we do?'

'Pay him, of course,' said Ann promptly. 'Serve them right. They're a lot of skinflints anyway. They own half the cash-order firms in Sydney. I never have liked Baptists. Piety and usury. We'll become Methodists. My father was a Methodist once.'

Alone with Reg she was not so stalwart. At first he blustered, denying the whole thing, but faced with Ann's persistent accusations he finally admitted it.

'Well, they wanted a new organ, didn't they?' he said.

'Yes,' said Ann.

'Then they'll never get it from freewill offerings. There's a lot more freewill than offering in that church. It was a good horse. I thought we'd be able to get the organ straight away.'

'Don't tell me,' said Ann. 'The horse lost.'

'Yes,' said Reg. 'The horse lost.'

Lyndon took up her new religion with vigour, but Ann and Reg gradually ceased to attend church. Mandy and Caroline started Sunday-school but they became rare visitors. When Mandy's teacher began to greet her as 'our little stray' she left altogether, Reg and Ann being too involved in their own problems to argue with an obstinate Mandy.

By life looked up. Reg seemed settled in his new job, but as the cold wind blew across the landscape Ann's fear grew. Reg had been with the Commerical company

eighteen months now. He ought to be safe. He was a good accountant. But as the ranks of the unemployed rose even within Fernleigh, as man after man returned home with the cold words 'Got the sack to-day,' Ann's worry increased, a worry whose roots lay in a chance remark made at the Commercial picnic the preceding spring, a month before the edifice of Wall Street toppled into ruin.

The picnic had been at Middle Harbour. When Mandy first saw the white-painted launch swinging on its moorings at Fort Macquarie she had known a moment's panic. But the day was fine, the water a sparkling, smooth surface.

Reg took her hand. 'No need to be scared, Mandy. The boat turns the corner just as we reach the Heads. You won't even feel it.'

And she didn't. The picnic grounds were delightful, pale green wiry grass, surrounded by long gums running right down to the water's edge. There were games and races, one of which Caroline won.

Then there was lunch. Sandwiches and cakes which Mumma had made and tea from a great white enamel teapot that one of the men was carrying around. Then they all went to the little tin-roofed hall and danced. Mandy sat on the seats by the side hugging her knees as the undulating couples swung in and out to the rhythm of the foxtrot. The crowd became hilarious.

'What about the left-over prizes George?' called a great fat woman. 'You've got two little rackets there. Give them to the kiddies.'

'Good idea,' said George. 'But they've got to earn 'em. Any two kiddies who can waltz?'

Suddenly she found Lyndon pushing her into the centre of the hall. She tried frantically to remember the stilted one, two, three Catriona had taught her at home. But it did not matter. A youth of nine took her arm and the next minute

she was whirling so fast around the room that she forgot her steps and concentrated on keeping upright.

'Reverse,' screamed a woman from the turning spinning mass at the side. 'She's getting dizzy.'

And so the mad pirouette continued, this time in the opposite direction. Then it was over. In shame, Mandy hung her head, waiting for condemnation. Instead a wave of applause burst around her and she found herself grasping a darling little tennis racket.

Ann, leaning against the wall, watching her small daughter's perilous journey, turned to see the managing director of the firm at her elbow.

'Enjoying it, Mrs Brown?' he said, smiling into her laughing brown eyes.

'Poor old Mandy,' she replied. 'He's a bit out of her class. Still, it's been a wonderful picnic, Mr Schofield.'

'I'm glad you've enjoyed it. How's Reg keeping these days? Pity he had all that illness this year.'

Ann felt a hand of fear squeeze her heart. As far as she knew, Reg had been as fit as a fiddle the entire year. Carefully she composed her face.

'Yes,' she said. 'But he's much better now, Mr Schofield. I'm sure he won't miss a day from now on.'

'That's fine,' said the big man with a pseudo-American flourish. 'Just fine.'

But it was not fine. Ann sat miserably in the launch on the return journey, anticipating the coming interview with Reg. Her day was spoilt. A growing ocean swell lifted the little vessel.

'We're at the Heads,' yelled Mandy, clutching Ann. 'We're going to sink.'

The boat settled. Reg laughed. 'There, chicken,' he said, 'it's all over. We're past the Heads now. Plain sailing ahead.'

He lifted her on his knee, the new tennis racket grasped

in her clenched hand. Suddenly it was worse again. The boat lifted sickeningly and plunged nose forward into the trough of the wave. The water splashed against the windows.

'Hurray!' said the boy on the opposite row of seats. 'We're just reaching the Heads.'

Mandy turned in fury on her father. Lifting the racket in both hands, she brought it down on his head.

Half the boat laughed. Reg's embarrassment grew. 'I'll give it to you, my lady, when we get home. You won't sit down for a week.'

Ann's impatience broke.

'You shouldn't have lied to her,' she said. 'It's your own fault. It always is.'

Reg looked in surprise at his wife. What was biting her? They'd had a good day.

Ann felt ashamed of her outburst but defiant. He had no right to spoil everything, no right at all. Grasping Mandy by the wrist, she moved down the other end of the boat, farther away from the frightening sickening lurch of the water, farther away from Reg.

It was the Spring of 1909 that the brown dog first came. Mandy was silent about the dog. He was part of her own world, the world she shared with no one. As the years passed Mandy's dream world became more important to her than the external universe. Her stick people grew as generation succeeded generation. They lived round the garden, in boughs of trees, canna lilies, broken tea-cups. Their histories had by now so many strands that at times entire branches of the imaginary families were neglected for weeks on end. After school, during holidays, she lived for the moment when she could drop all material burdens and flee to the comfort of her own creation. The family worried about a neglected Caroline, bought the latter a Meccano set to while away the hours.

'Mandy won't play,' said Caroline. 'She talks all day to those silly old sticks.'

The dog belonged to Bakers, a family looked down on by Ann in the same way as the nineteenth-century aristocrats of Carolina looked down on the 'white trash'. They were kind enough to the dog in a neglectful, haphazard sort of way, but he loved Mandy. Every afternoon after school she took her bread and butter to the broad cement step at the foot of the back ramp and waited for him, half the slice clutched in one hand for his delectation.

And he always came, a little hang-dog because he was often kicked, his curly retriever coat tangled but soft, his spaniel ears and eyes pleading for the love Mandy bestowed on him. He was a gentle dog, the kind a small girl could hug without fear. Down the path he sidled, brown eyes anxious in case

Rex the fox-terrier was about, to lay his head on her lap. It was not that Mandy loved him more than Rex, their family dog. But in some way he belonged to her alone. Somewhere the child sensed that she was the only person in the world who really cared about him and in return he gave his entire devotion to her.

Towards the end of January he failed to turn up. The warmth of the season charmed the fruit-pendulous garden with a touch of drowsy gaiety that was part and parcel of the physical sensation peculiar to summer vacations. Mandy missed the dog and spent most of her time playing around the cement step in case he should come. But she assumed he was out with the Baker boys and, though hurt, she did not worry unduly. When school began he would come again.

Yet her underlying disgruntlement made her touchy, particularly when it came to a crisis. The day was hot, perfect for summer enjoyment, but Mandy was far from happy. Her loose dark hair hung around her shoulders stinking of creosote. Everyone would smell her coming for weeks. But there had been head lice at school and Ann insisted on drastic remedies throughout the vacation. Mandy's storms had been unavailing. Her protesting head had been forced into the horrid, foul-smelling basin.

'Now sit in the sun until you dry,' said Ann.

It was boring, it was miserable. She picked up a handful of pebbles and flung them at the palisade fence. Plop. Plop. Plop. She brought down three passionfruit in a neat row along the ground.

Lyndon was inside getting ready for a tennis tournament. Somehow things were not going well for Lyndon. On the dressing table in front of her was a newspaper cutting. Give added colour to your cheeks, ran the article. Don't worry with expensive preparations. Simply pat them firmly with a strong hairbrush.

Lyndon had been patting with Catriona's brush for twenty minutes now. The colour tingled in her cheeks, a violent red. There were even a few little pinpricks of blood where the hard bristles had broken the skin. Lyndon was nearly in tears. Every time she stopped her face settled down to a blotchy quilted patchwork horror. White lumps interspersed with measly red hillocks. Plop, plop, plop went Mandy's stones against the fence. Lyndon's exasperation rose and burst. She needed an outlet and Mandy was handy. She put her head out of the window.

'If you don't stop breaking up the fence, I'll tell Mumma,' she said.

Mandy put out her tongue.

'Silly face,' she said, 'I'm not messing up the fence. I'm getting passionfruit.'

'Don't be rude,' said Lyndon. 'You're a greedy little guts. There's never any fruit left for anyone else.'

'Greedy guts yourself,' said Mandy.

She made a face and in doing so really saw Lyndon for the first time. The tears of mirth streaked down her cheeks.

'Look at your face, Lyndon. It's the funniest thing I've ever seen. It's all blotchy and red. You must have scarlet fever.'

Lyndon in fury picked up the hairbrush and hurled it at Mandy. She missed.

'Mumma, Mumma,' she called.

Mandy looked at her with grave distaste. Bending down, she collected a lemon from beneath a nearby tree. Mandy's aim was good. It sailed through the open window, straight for Lyndon's eye with all the force of Mandy's strongly supple hands and wrists.

'Mumma, Mumma,' yelled Lyndon again.

'Cowardy, cowardy custard,' called Mandy, then fled quickly to the bottom of the tennis court in case Mumma really did come after her.

'Tittle-tat,' she muttered as she went. 'Lyndon's nothing but a lousy old tittle-tat.'

Lunch was an uncomfortable meal. Ann was preoccupied and Lyndon a horrible combination of white blotches, red pimples and black eye. Mandy gave a suppressed giggle as she sat down, but seeing Ann's stern eye fixed firmly upon her she hastily smothered it. Lyndon aimed a blow at Mandy's leg under the table and missed. Mandy flicked her toe at Lyndon in a sharp upward curve that Donnie Southey had shown her and hit. Lyndon gave a roar. Ann said sharply, 'Any nonsense and out you go, all of you.'

Lyndon pointed at Mandy's hair behind Ann's back and held her nose significantly.

'Mumma,' she said. 'Can I take Caroline to tennis with me this afternoon?'

Caroline beamed with pleasure.

'I suppose so,' said Ann. Lyndon gave a malicious look at Mandy.

'You, Mandy,' said Ann, 'will have to take the house payment up to the Peters.'

Mandy's mind recoiled in revolt. She hated going to the Peters, little mousy prying Mrs Peters, silly droopy Violet Peters and those awful rough boys who pulled her plaits.

'I went last time,' she protested, 'it's Caroline's turn.'

'Caroline's coming to tennis so she can't take it,' said Lyndon sweetly.

'I won't take it,' said Mandy. 'It's Caroline's turn. I went last time. I'm not going to that horrid house, I won't.'

'You certainly will, my lady,' said Ann. 'You'll do just as I tell you or you'll regret it, believe me.'

Tears rolled down Mandy's face.

'It's Caroline's turn,' she said.

'Well, Caroline can go twice to make up,' said Ann. 'It's no use making a fuss, Mandy. It's due and that's that.'

Lyndon cast a black look of triumph in Mandy's direction. It was too much. No camouflage this time. She kicked Lyndon's leg fair and square in the middle of the shin, then fled from the room.

Ann passed her hand wearily over her brow. If she had remembered in time she wouldn't have allowed Caroline to go to tennis. Mandy had had the blues over her hair already that morning. She suspected Lyndon of malice somehow. She supposed she ought to make Lyndon take both of them but that would cause trouble and it was good for Caroline to have a few interests of her own. Mandy had not been playing with her very much lately. And Mandy was difficult. Yet because she also loathed Peters, Ann understood in part just what troubled the child. She sensed the self-conscious torture that the trip meant to Mandy. Still, discipline was discipline and a house cannot kowtow to the tantrums of the young.

'Come at once and eat up your dinner, Mandy,' she called. 'And no more nonsense from you, Lyndon,' she added. 'I'm not entirely blind . . .'

The day was hot. Mandy pulled the elastic strap of her linen hat firmly under her chin. Her bare feet curved outward to avoid the hot earth. Here and there she had to jump to cool off a little. In her hand she clutched a penny. Ann had thrust it into her palm just as she was leaving. Would she make it an ice-block at the corner shop or would she have aniseed balls and a sherbert-cone on the way home? The heat decided her in favour of the ice block. Though dear, it had the charm of novelty. Commercial ice-blocks had not yet inundated Fernleigh. The little coloured cubes were made in their own refrigerator by the two old ladies who ran the shop.

Peters lived at the other end of town past the ramshackle

railway shed, one of a line of dreary, dark brown weather-board houses crected on spec by Peters himself. Mrs Peters was small, dried up, worn out by the blustering virility of Peters, with eyes whose peering intensity was increased by her bi-focal lenses. In the corner of the room was Violet, her doughy, suppressed face lacking all expression, her white colourless hair emphasising the paleness of her albino eyebrows. Mandy saw them occasionally in church, Mrs Peters clad in the brown remnants of the rag bag, Violet in clothes made perpetually for growth. Her frocks, huge and shapeless, hung below her weather-beaten little knees, her hats overshadowed the top hair of her pallid eyebrows.

Mandy was finding it worse than usual. She sat on a hard-backed chair while Mrs Peters waved the receipt in the open window. The pen had deposited huge blobs on all the o's and Mrs Peters had never heard of blotting paper. Mandy waited anxiously. Ann's views on coming back without a receipt were well known.

'I could send it to your mother later,' whined Mrs Peters.

'No,' said Mandy politely. 'I'd better wait.'

'My, you're getting a big girl now,' said Mrs Peters. 'Your dress is quite short, isn't it?'

Mandy tried hard to pull the skimpy pink cotton frock further down to cover her arm brown legs.

'I don't suppose it matters. You haven't got any brothers, have you?'

'No,' said Mandy. A spark lit her eye. 'Dadda says with such good daughters, he doesn't need sons like other people.'

'All men want a son,' said Mrs Peters. 'Is that sister of yours still at university?'

'Yes,' said Mandy.

'Waste of money on a girl,' said Mrs Peters. 'She ought to be learning to scrub a house properly. What's she studying now?'

'Economics,' said Mandy. The spark of anger grew. 'I don't suppose you know what that is,' she added.

Mrs Peters looked at her hard.

'Little girls in well-brought-up homes don't talk to grown ups like that,' she said.

'I'm sorry,' said Mandy, well aware of Ann's reaction if Mrs Peters reported her rudeness.

'And your father's still working, I suppose,' said Mrs Peters.

'Yes,' said Mandy shortly.

'Well, here's the receipt. Dry at last. Don't lose it after your long wait.'

Mandy took it gratefully and escaped. Violet Peters followed her down the street.

'My mother says your father won't last long in his job,' said Violet. 'My mother says he's a money-waster.'

Mandy's feelings at last broke out of control.

'Yah,' she said. 'My father's better than your father, Violet Peters. I don't have to wear silly clothes like you. Your clothes don't fit you, so there. Everyone laughs at you. Yah, yah, yah!'

She ran down the street scuffing her toes in the dust. A vague feeling of guilt oppressed her. Ann always said it was nasty to mock another's misfortune and in her heart of hearts Mandy was sorry for Violet. Still, they had no right to ask her question after question and no right to say things about Dadda. When she thought of nasty, cruel, red-faced Mr Peters, her eyes smarted with unshed tears and she quickly wiped the back of her dusty hand across her face. Mustn't cry or Mumma would know and she couldn't explain to Mumma about Dadda...

It was a wonderful evening, the sort that made up for the horrible day. Reg had arrived home with his arms full of parcels. There was something for everyone. Warm, cuddly

pyjamas with flowers and bunnies on them, stockings and a lovely, lacy set of underwear for Mumma and a school blazer for Lyndon. Dadda had thrown the parcels to them in turn, laughing as she and Caroline fell over one another in their efforts to catch them.

'You must have won the lottery,' said Ann, and Mandy wondered why she sounded so apprehensive and why her father failed to reply.

Still it was fun. They pulled on their new socks and Ann allowed them to wear them for tea. After tea, Lyndon stacked the dishes as usual and Mandy carried the pepper and salt back to the pantry. Reg put his head through the kitchen door.

'Run off, all of you,' he said. 'I'll help Mumma to-night. I want to talk to her.'

Mandy and Caroline escaped with a whoop of relief into the dusky warm twilight. The air was alive with the wings of a thousand insects battling to enter the lighted house. They hovered in an opaque cloud around the street lights.

'Come on, Donnie and Mary,' they called over the fence. 'Let's play bushrangers.'

Ann washed while Reg dried.

'Why,' she asked herself 'why is he helping?'

For a time Reg said nothing. His pipe jutted as ever out of the corner of his mouth. Carefully he picked up each plate, wiped and polished it thoroughly, as if his only ambition in life was to dry dishes.

'Well,' said Ann at last, 'what is it? I'm quite sure it's not love of my company that makes you desert your armchair and paper.'

Still he was silent. Then he put down the towel, pulled out a chair near the kitchen table.

'Lost my job today, Ann. Sorry, old girl. Not my fault.'

They have to cut down and I was the last to be taken on.'

Ann's mind wavered uncertainly between the consciousness of a long-anticipated event and sheer disbelief that it had happened at last. There was something wrong, some inconsistency. Her mind groped after it.

'You're joking, Reg,' she said. 'You couldn't have bought all those presents if you'd lost your job. You're joking and I don't think it's very funny.'

She choked down her tears. Reg put his arms around her.

'I'm sorry, Ann. It's not a joke, my dear. I bought the clothes with my last salary cheque.'

And Ann believed him. It was something he alone would do. She knew now that she had sensed it from the moment he came in the door laden like Santa Claus. All those wonderful parcels. But she had kidded herself that they owed their good fortune to a horse.

She murmured to herself. 'What will we do? We need the money to live.'

Suddenly she was angry.

'You're thoroughly irresponsible,' she said. 'I've stood it for years and years and years, but I've had you now, had you completely.'

He fiddled with a knife.

'Don't be angry, Ann,' he said. 'If you think for a moment you'll see that what I did was plain common sense. We'll survive somehow. People always do. The girls will help. But we needed the clothes. If I hadn't bought them that cheque would have gone in two weeks on food and we'd be no better off than we are now. At least we'll be warm when winter comes.'

Weakly, Ann sat down and looked at him. Suddenly she began to laugh, mirth and hysteria shaking her body with uncontrollable merriment...

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It had been a good game. Mandy picked the dry grass from her frock and shook back her hair. Billy Baker had joined in too and he knew some wonderful grips. She and Caroline, Donnie and Mary were kicking up the dust as they walked home.

'I like Billy,' said Caroline.

'So do I,' said Mandy. 'But Mumma doesn't.'

'Did you hear about their dog?' said Donnie.

Mandy's heart stopped beating. She continued to walk, head bent, looking unconcerned.

'What?' said Caroline.

'It took five bullets to kill it,' said Donnie. 'It went round and round the old slaughter yard, yelling like a crazy thing. The constable got it in the end though.'

'Why did they shoot it, Donnie?'

Mandy heard her own voice with surprise. It sounded like someone else speaking. She herself was locked up inside her body away from all of them. She felt cold as if she were enclosed in ice.

'He bit Jackie Peters,' said Donnie. 'You must've heard. They were playing marbles a couple of weeks ago and the dog picked up Jackie's best connie. He wouldn't drop it so Jackie put his hand down the dog's throat and punched him and the dog bit him. Mr Peters reported it to the police and they shot it.'

'But he hurt the dog,' Mandy heard her voice say. 'Of course it bit him. Any dog would.'

'I dunno,' said Donnie. 'Mr Peters said it was a real savage brute and Jackie had to have three stitches and the police said it had to be shot. It must have been savage 'cos the Bakers didn't do anything to stop it.'

'You're a liar,' said Mandy, turning in fury on Donnie. 'A wicked liar.'

Seizing his shoulders she shook him till his teeth rattled.

'I hate you, Donnie Southey,' she said. 'I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.'

Abruptly she dropped him and ran off down the road.

Donnie picked himself up in bewilderment. Caroline and Mary helped brush him down.

'I've had her,' said Donnie. 'What a temper. I ain't a parcel. What'd I do, anyhow? I didn't do anything.'

'No,' said Caroline. 'You didn't.' She slipped her hand into his. 'But you shouldn't have told her about that dog.'

'She asked, didn't she?'

'Not till you said they shot it. She can't bear animals to be killed. And she liked that dog. I know. She thought I didn't, but I did. She used to talk to it after school every afternoon.'

'I dunno,' said Donnie. 'I didn't do anything. I didn't kill the dog. She didn't have to half murder me, did she?'

'No,' said Caroline. 'She didn't. I guess,' she added with pleasure at the opportunity to try out a new word, 'I guess you were just the scapegoat.'

Mandy ran through the grass, misery in her heart. For the moment she couldn't even cry. She was trapped in a frustration deeper than any she had ever known. There was nothing she could do about it. The dog was dead. She couldn't make him live again whatever she did. Her own futility overwhelmed her. She beat her head against the friendly trunk of the old gum tree overhanging the tennis court in an agony of impotence. He was not savage. He was gentle. She knew. She hated Peters. She hated all of them. She hated their bullying power, their nasty, prying curiosity. The constable owed Peters a big mortgage. Everyone knew that. It wasn't fair. The dog wasn't savage. She fought against her first bitter knowledge of pure injustice.

Finally she lay down in the rough grass at the far side of the court. She buried her face into its green-brown harshness.

The darkness wrapped around her. Slowly her anger subsided and at last she could cry with an abandon that expressed all the unhappiness of her soul.

Inside, Caroline spun on the piano stool and tried a new version of 'God Save the King'. What a queer night. Dadda and Mumma were sitting in opposite chairs doing nothing and neither of them said anything. She wished Mandy would come in. It was past bed-time and it was dark. If she didn't come soon someone would notice and there would be a row. She wished Mandy wouldn't do these things. Caroline hated rows, she hated anger. She couldn't understand why no one had mentioned bed already. Mumma was usually right on time. Caroline gazed anxiously out at the stars. Mandy must come, she must.

To wile away her anxiety she tried a new accompaniment to the national anthem, her fingers finding the notes by instinct. The familiar melody drifted across the room flowing gently beneath the hands of the small girl at the piano, but no one appeared to hear it and still Mandy did not come.

Reg was proved right. In fact they did not starve. Nena and Catriona rallied around with an extra contribution each week. And Ann took in sewing. She had always been competent with her hands and she bartered her skill and time for small payments that helped diminish the grocer's bill or pay the butcher. Reg was filled with grandiose schemes for letting the tennis court, but no one in the depth was tempted to hire courts, especially as Reg had no money to replace, by the proper article, the line of wire netting that had always served as a net. He spoke vaguely of buying goats and cows, growing vegetables, but as the days ticked by his enthusiasm became lost in depression.

He had thought at first that it would be simply a matter of getting a job. True, there were thousands out of work, but he'd lost jobs before this and always found another. Morning after morning he dressed himself in his best grey suit, pulled on his grey felt, tucked his newspaper under his arm and set out to join the long lines of men hunting for employment. Fortunately his train ticket still carried two months travel before it expired so his fares cost him nothing. But as day after day passed without success, as the jobs in the paper grew fewer and fewer, his spirit drooped too. Yet he had hope. He had always been successful, hadn't he? Hope, until the day the little clerk with the down of youth still clinging to his cheeks, ran his eye over the card and said:

'Forty-four, eh? Not much offering for you, old man. A bit elderly, you know. The younger men have their exams and certificates.'

Reg felt his neck grow red with rage.

'Look here, young man,' he roared. 'I was studying accountancy before you were born. The proper way, the hard way. Working at it day in and day out.'

'Well, you're not working at it now,' smirked the clerk rudely. 'Next please.'

The following day Reg did not go out at all. Just sat at home and read the paper. And the following day too. And the day after that. Ticking monotonous time. Hours without future.

After the first few months Ann decided they'd have to sell the books. She thought of applying for the dole, but she found on application that she was not eligible if she kept capital goods like the piano.

'I'll never sell my piano,' she vowed. 'Never.'

The morning they sorted the books was a long one. There were all the old volumes they'd bought up so gaily when the Fernleigh School of Arts closed down. Lord Lytton, Harrison Ainsworth, Conan Doyle, Arnold Bennett, the favourite authors of Reg, with odd romantic volumes, *Dear Enemy*, *Daddy Long Legs*, beloved of Ann.

After the books came the fruit. The corner shop bought lemons at a halfpenny each, any time, and sold them for a penny. Great, big yellow first grade lemons. In summer they were willing to take peaches and plums plus a few loquats. Mandy grew used to trotting up the hill, clutching three or four dozen of this and that in a paper bag, to be carefully counted by the two old ladies before they handed over the tiny pieces of silver.

Beyond that, life for Mandy did not appear to change very much. It was the unimportant things, the odds and ends. Somehow Mumma never seemed to have hair ribbons for school any more. Her plaits were tied with unhemmed lengths of coloured material culled from the clients' left-overs, and if at first Mandy and Caroline were inclined to tuck their plaits in their blazers, they soon forgot about it as

the weeks passed. After all they were not the only children whose hair was tied with rags.

Perhaps Lyndon felt it most of all, a teenager on the brink of womanhood, a school senior. And there was no money at all for pretty frocks or fancy hair-dos. By saving odd pennies, selling her old bangle to an itinerant gold merchant, she bought a pair of tongs, and with the aid of the gas, curled her fringe and the long ends of her hair; but life in general seemed a series of petty humiliations. She was now not only expected to visit the butcher on her way home but she had also to trace over town for all the odd specials advertised in the cheaper sections of the city.

When her friends tried to accompany her she shook them off with tales of imaginary elocution lessons, quite unaware that at least one of her best friends was equally keen to evade her company. And so the great game of pretence continued on all sides. No one must know. We are all comfortable. All well off. Our fathers are resting. No one is out of work.

Nena was now at home again and Catriona in her final year at university. That summer Catriona brought home a new boy friend, a young, shy dentistry student. Ann sensed at once that this time Catriona was serious. Reg remained blind until Ann said one day:

'What we'll do when Catriona marries, I don't know. We can't expect Bob to keep all his in-laws.'

'Married? Who said anything about getting married? Not Catriona anyway,' said Reg. 'Why, she's barely grown up.'

'She's twenty-three,' said Ann.

'A mere child,' said Reg.

'You were married at nineteen,' said Ann slyly.

'It was different then,' said Reg. 'We were more mature, more developed.'

'Perhaps,' said Ann.

'Anyhow,' said Reg, 'who said she's getting married?'

'No one,' said Ann. 'But you have eyes, haven't you?'

'I won't have it,' said Reg. 'She'd have told me. She wouldn't do anything like that without consulting her father. You're just an old match-maker. All mothers think of nothing but marriage.'

Ann simply smiled.

After that Reg took quite a dislike to poor Bob. Everything he said he contradicted. But Catriona, while annoyed, ignored him. His authority was lost in ineffectuality born in the wastes of unemployment. The lack of respect for parental power, nurtured by his failure to cope with life for the past ten years reached its peak as his financial dependence on his children increased.

But it was not only Reg who viewed the budding romance with disfavour. Nena too was unco-operative. Her sense of family integrity was threatened and her fear at the impending split in the family unity took the form of resentment at her own inferior position in the household.

'I'm sick of sharing a room with Catriona,' she said. 'I've never had a room of my own. Never.'

'It's your room just as much as Catriona's,' said Ann.

'It never has been,' said Nena. 'Everyone calls it Catriona's room. And now I'm not even entitled to a proper sleep. He's always in there with her, mugging and kissing at all hours. Makes me sick.'

At the end of that year Catriona did get engaged and the fear of providing for a wedding began to haunt Ann's dreams.

'Don't worry, Mum,' said Catriona. 'We're not getting married for a couple of years. Bob has to set himself up in practice first. Surely Dad will be working again by then.'

'I suppose so,' said Ann wearily.

Sometimes she felt Reg would never work again. Never.

And he was being petty over Catriona's engagement. Did he really think he could keep the girls at home forever?

The dinner-table now became a regular battle-ground. Lang's moratorium and endowment acts were a boon to the struggling family and Jack Lang became Reg's new hero. Catriona, reared in the newest theories of economics, had other views.

'Spend!' roared Reg between mouthfuls of Ann's wonderful custard tarts. 'Spend, I tell you. Give the people money to spend and everything will be all right.'

'Don't be silly, Dad,' said Catriona. 'It's not as simple as all that. You don't know enough economics to pass an opinion.'

'And I suppose you do.' Reg spluttered with rage. 'That's what I've educated you for, to be told by my own children I'm an ignorant know-nothing. An old man out of work. The cast-off who dragged himself up by the bootstraps. Leave him to rot on the scrap heap. Take no notice of him. Poor old cow.'

And so the battles raged. The superiority of youth versus the self-pity of middle-age. The political quarrels touched even the children.

'You mustn't say that,' Mandy said reprovingly to Caroline as she repeated some child's remark about the Premier. 'Our Daddy likes Mr Lang.'

She traced thoughtfully with her finger the letters on the little stick in front of them. 'Lang is Right.'

Ann, too, entered the war with vigour. When one of the evening dailies came out with a full-page cartoon of Mr Bavin, one of the leaders of the Opposition, Ann chuckled with glee.

'It's a beaut,' she said. 'I'm going to stick it on the lamp post. Get me the scissors, Mandy.'

Mandy watched fascinated as she clipped out the drawing and trimmed the edges. She wouldn't really put it on the

lamp post, would she? What if someone saw her? They might put her in gaol.

Mandy's stomach cramped uncomfortably.

After dark Ann took down the paste, tucked the picture under her arm and departed...

'Wonder who stuck that up?' said Donnie Southey.

'Gee, they're silly,' said Billy Baker.

'Magine putting an old picture on a lamp post,' said Millicent Davis.

'I bet the police will put them in gaol when they catch them,' said Mary Southey. 'Won't they, Mandy?'

Mandy felt Caroline's cold hand clenched in hers and she knew Caroline was embarrassed too. What would they say if they knew it was their mother? How could Mumma do a thing like that? They'd never be able to face the kids again if they found out.

'I dunno,' she muttered. 'Maybe, Mary. Pretty silly, anyway.'

Immediately she shut her mind to the Judas-like reproach that constricted her throat. At night she lay awake waiting for the knock of the dark-coated policeman armed with handcuffs, eager to take her mother to prison...

At the end of Catriona was sent to the country, but even the absence of one of the warring elements did not bring peace to the household. Nena seemed determined to see that Lyndon gained a fair go amidst the economic restrictions. No doubt as their disgruntlement deepened Ann and Reg both picked on the teenager too much, expected an understanding beyond her years, but Nena's intervention did not make life easier. Lyndon, tired of the restriction of life, picked on Mandy. Ann, concerned to protect her smaller daughter against the invidious teasing of the older one, sheltered Mandy only to find herself in constant opposition to Nena. Mandy, the unwitting cause of many a fight, drew more into

herself. Her garden, her own creations, her school work which she now loved were her refuges from reality. Nena had been her god, but for the first time Mandy had an inkling that her god was bound to the whims of her arch-enemy, Lyndon. Too young to analyse the conflicts that raged constantly between Ann and Reg, Ann and Lyndon, Ann and Nena, Lyndon and Reg, Mandy took Caroline and crept into the bush to play make-believe with the Southeys.

'The devil's in that part of the bush,' said Mandy, pointing to a scrubby clump of trees. 'I know. I can hear him.' And the immediate fear in the eyes of the other children bore witness to the reality of Satan at that time and place for all of them.

As month followed month without regular work, Ann felt more and more destitute. Sometimes she hinted they ought to sell up, go back to the city where life was cheaper and fares a few pence. But somehow she could never quite do it. This house was her home. She had watched the trees grow, the fruit ripen, part of herself. Nena listening, watching the line of worry deepen on her mother's face, felt a growing hate of Fernleigh. Where were all the people her father had helped in the past, those who had benefited from his openhanded generosity in the days of their prosperity, the cricketers, the billiards players? Most of them had faded away, gone with the swing of the roundabouts, the click of the balls.

And then Ann was not well. The spectre of illness began to stalk her. At first they thought it was gastritis. For two or three months the local doctor continued to treat her as if she had a slight bowel upset. Ann refused to call in the one man in the district in whom she had complete confidence. She owed him money. She had been unable to pay that bill for Lyndon's asthma last summer. She struggled on, well one week, sick the next.

'It's worry,' thought Reg. 'Worry. If only I could get a job.'

As Mandy's ninth birthday approached Ann worried more. There was no money for presents and Mandy was not really happy that year. Ann knew. She played too much by herself, absorbed in the stories of the little sticks that she carried around with her. What could she get her to reassure the child of her security, to show her love? She picked up a little gold brooch of Lyndon's, long discarded. The clasp was broken. She called Mandy to her.

'Would you like me to have this brooch fixed for you?' she asked.

Ann looked almost guiltily into the eyes of her small daughter and was startled at the depth of understanding she found there.

'I'd love it,' said Mandy softly. 'I'd really love it.'

And Ann was satisfied even though Mandy herself worried at the thought of Lyndon. Lyndon had loved that brooch too.

The day before Mandy's birthday Reg went out in answer to an ad. He must be successful this time, he must. The depression of failure hung over him, reinforced by a complete sobriety. There was no money to drink. Ann knew exactly how much he set out with. His fare plus a single shilling in case of accidents. He knew the shilling must come home again.

Mandy slipped away to play for the afternoon, so she was not home when Ann went to bed. When she returned well after five, her father was already there, black in mood because there was no job. What was the use? They were always gone by the time he reached the city. Fernleigh was too far. He hated Ann to be in bed. It added to his bellyful of guilt. Tea was late. Nena was always late. She watched him cynically as she took her own time over the chops and potatoes. Why couldn't Ann have stayed on her feet until the meal was over? She knew he would be tired out chasing

round the city. The soles of his shoes were too thin for comfort and he was getting too old for that sort of game anyway. Catriona would have tried to get his meal on time but not Nena.

By the time tea was finished, however, Reg had forgotten his own fatigue. Ann was really ill. So they called the man they should have called months ago. After five minutes with Ann, his face grave, he rang a surgeon immediately. There was no hospital on their side of Sydney at all, so a medical friend of Bob's arranged for a bed in a city hospital twenty miles away, where he himself was a resident.

'I don't know if she'll live,' the doctor said to Reg. 'She should have had this operation long ago. She's in poor general health too. Worn out by worry, I'd say.'

Mandy watched silently as Nena and Lyndon put her mother's things together. Bob's tiny car was ready to leave. Ann looked at Mandy, at the anxiety in the dark eyes and smiled.

'I'll be all right, sweetheart,' she said. 'And I haven't forgotten you. Get me the little box in my drawer, Nena.'

Nena drew it out and Ann passed it quietly to Mandy.

'Have a happy birthday, darling,' she said. 'And you too, Caroline.'

Her arms closed around both of them.

The next day, Mandy's ninth birthday, they began the long fight for Ann's life.

In the long run they lost the fight but not immediately. They thought she would die then, on Mandy's birthday, but Ann fought back. The resilience of her spirit rose above the shock of immediate operation to apparent recovery. She faced with courage the long period in hospital, the months confined to bed. And her reward? A tedious, painful death instead of an immediate one, a struggle against invidious, never-conquered septicaemia that weakened her body, and, as operation succeeded operation, her spirit too.

For almost a year Ann lived, fighting death, hopes raised by one brief period of recovery. For a short time she came home again, in October, when spring hovered with the fruition of harvest on the fringes of summer, but by Christmas she was back in hospital. Christmas Day was spent trekking back and forth, their new toys clutched in their arms to show Mumma.

That year had a wearisome make-believe quality for Mandy. In one part of her mind she never really lived it. Early fear was replaced by acceptance and for the most part she ceased to think about her mother's illness. She was getting better, one day she would come home, one day.

In the meantime Nena kept the house running in its usual pattern. Yet there was over the entire period an unfamiliar atmosphere of desperate haste. No lazing in bed any more while Mumma got the breakfast, no waiting for her to call them. Nena had to be at school by nine o'clock too and even though she managed to get an appointment at Fernleigh itself, early morning became a desperate battle to get away on time. Fortunately Reg had always liked cooking and

helped out by taking over a great deal of the housework and some of the meals. But hours of his time were spent on the long trips to and from the hospital. It was to be many years before Mandy knew again the calm of a maternal household before breakfast. The breakneck speed of the morning rush, the table to be set, shoes to be brushed, bags packed, beds made, hair plaited, a circular process of tension that involved everyone. Eternal rush, the pattern of morning living.

Reg found too that there seemed to be less time to look for work. There was so much to do in Ann's absence and so much to worry about. He could not conceive life without Ann. His mind fought against the realisation that he was losing her. There had always been Ann. He saw again the brown-eyed girl sitting on the fence dangling her black-stockinged legs. It had seemed to him that the union begun on that day long ago would continue forever and if he ever abused their relationship it was partly because he was so sure of its eternal continuity.

Meanwhile Nena struggled to live. On a short-course teacher's salary she fed them. Catriona in the country clad them. In the time that could have embroidered a trousseau she embroidered frocks for her two small sisters. But the burden of financial worry fell most heavily on the shoulders of twenty-two-year-old Nena. Distance gives at least some insubstantiality to money worries. The grocer's bills are immediate, the meat has to be bought, the bread paid for. Nena's puritan soul abhorred credit, she hated borrowing. Her own youth became buried beneath a burden of problems that would have taxed a much older woman. And her deep essential love for Ann battled with the nightmare that even she, with all her religious faith, was incapable of grasping. Ann would get better, she would. Meanwhile the girl looked with desperation on the mounting pile of bills, felt growing impatience at her father's unemployment, a deepening

hatred for Fernleigh and all the problems and disappointments of the past ten years.

'We'll have to get out,' she said to Reg. 'We'll have to go to where it's cheaper to live. I can't cope with the price of food here. I just can't. And the fares. It's bad enough getting to the hospital. We can't really afford to send you into the city to look for work.'

Mandy, curled on the old cane chair on the back veranda, heard Nena and felt fear grip her stomach and loosen her bowels. They couldn't leave Fernleigh. They couldn't. It was Mamma's. One day she would come home. She crept out to the garden and wound her arms around the peach trees now pendulous with ripe fruit. She ran her hands over the smooth rough boughs, sniffed the odour of incipient apple fruition. Slowly the tears rolled beneath her lids and she laid her head in the crux of the bough and wept alone.

The monotony of life was emphasised by the long journeys to the hospital. They were involved in miles of travel. Train and tram and tram. Mandy and Caroline had had very little repetitive experience of trams in the past. The long wait for connections, the bumpy hard seats, the glare of suburban asphalt footpaths were all relatively new to the children accustomed to trains. The trains seemed slow, jerky and nauseating. Caroline, in fact was sick regularly. By the time they reached the crowded hospital in the crowded city area, both little girls were worn out before they even saw their mother. And though they were glad to see her it was tedious. There were so many beds, such a horrid smell and Mamma was still and quiet. The hour would tick away with incredible slowness. There was nothing to do. Sometimes they were allowed to creep out to the balcony where a refreshing glimpse could be caught of the upper harbour, pleasant between the crowded docks and industrialised foreshores. But such glimpses were rare. Nowhere to play. 'Please be

silent.' It was with relief that they tumbled into bed at night after the long, long day.

By the end of February they no longer saw their mother. As the battle grew grimmer, the operations more frequent, Ann could not bear the restlessness of impatient child hands, the never ending queries and anecdotes of the young. And in her own sensibility, she could no longer bear to let them see her as she now was. The material picture of death was not, she felt, fit for children. And so for the two of them the make-believe quality of their mother's absence grew. She was just not there any more. Days were spent with Mrs Southey or other friendly neighbours.

Catriona came home at the beginning of May and the elder members of the family settled down to wait for the death that seemed so long coming. When it finally happened Mandy did not believe it. It seemed some fiction born of the long, cold, grey day. Nena picked them up from one of Lyndon's friends well after dark, but it was not until they came into the broad comfortable kitchen that Nena told them. Mandy felt the light strike her face like a blow after the cold rush of air that cooled her cheeks as she ran down the hill. For a moment she felt exhilarated.

'Do you know what Caroline and I did at Lanes?' she began, then stopped. Her father was crying, standing just outside the circle of light cast by the swinging shade. Lyndon suddenly turned her face away but not before Mandy saw her grief. There was really no need now for Nena to kneel down and put her arms around them, no need to say anything. She knew.

For twenty-four hours she felt the desperate need to escape. She felt embarrassment, deeper, more wounding than sorrow. Her father's lost eyes, Nena's controlled emotion, Catriona's open sorrow. The curious, carefully unconcerned glances of their neighbours. She did not know

what to say, what she ought to do. Should she try to talk to Caroline about it? Mumma had said she must always look after Caroline. But she couldn't, she couldn't say anything. They sat on the woodheap with Southneys while life went on in the house above.

Mrs Brown died, didn't she?' said Donnie.

Mandy nodded.

'Mum said she died yesterday,' said Mary.

And again Mandy nodded, then realised as a stab ran through her finger that she was driving her clenched hands hard against the splintered wood. She drove them again fiercely, deliberately, enjoying the relief the sensation of physical pain gave her.

Finally she sought the garden. This was her refuge, her escape from reality. She passed from the peach trees, hung in the apple tree, caressed the thick, lumpy bark of the gum tree. When the dog died, the tough gums had comforted her, but she could find no consolation now. The garden was the framework. The basis of her security for all those years had been Ann. She wandered aimlessly from flower to flower, trying to grasp that there was no longer a god in her garden, She sought comfort in her own world of dreams, the fantasy lives of her stick people, but she found none.

And because it no longer mattered, because the world of blue sky and gold sun had at last been able to shelter her from death, Mandy did not even care when they decided to move. Catriona opposed the suggestion, but as she was marrying almost immediately the final decision was not hers.

'You try to keep house on no money and live in a district like this,' said Nena, pushing the economic motive, but the deeper promptings of her heart, her desire to get away from the immediate feeling and presence of Ann about the house she could not explain.

They found a tiny single-fronted cottage in one of the

better streets of the Leichhardt Annandale area, a neat enough little place with a yard not much bigger than the drive way at Fernleigh.

Then came the process of cleaning and burning and packing. Mandy watched the smoke rising above the pile of collected rubbish and felt fancifully that all she had ever loved was spiralling away with it. But she was not old enough to be entirely proof against the excitement of removal. She and Caroline helped to sort and stack, secreting as they went their own very special private little treasures.

A week before they left Catriona was married. She was now twenty-five and Bob had managed to buy a tiny practice on the south coast. Catriona bought a wool frock for herself and knitted cardigans and skirts for her small sisters, not very fancy but new. It was not a happy wedding. Years later Mandy was to remember it and feel sorry for Catriona. The day itself was bleak and the family tense. As the minister's voice droned out the vows and Catriona's clear young voice responded, her aunts, oppressed by the thought of Ann's recent death, wept copiously. Her father relinquished his rights to her gloomily, as if she were deserting him in the hour of his need and there was no Ann to counteract his natural possessiveness. Finally they all kissed Catriona and packed her into the tiny car beside Bob. Catriona kissed and hugged them all, then honked her way into a new life over which still hung the problems of her inherited family.

But there was no time to worry about Catriona. In a few days the truck came and within three or four hours the familiar rooms were bare. Mandy felt a deep desolation of spirit, combined with an anxious excitement. When she first saw her new home depression won. There was not much to explore. The surrounding streets made her think of the hospital and the nightmare she wished to forget. She and

Caroline nodded dutifully while their elders pointed out all the places of interest.

'Just think,' said Lyndon, 'we can go swimming and to town. We're only four miles from Sydney.'

And Mandy and Caroline just thought.

Yet change is a strange thing. At night, worn out by the day, Mandy went to bed thoroughly unhappy. But early next morning the adventure of life began again. Mrs Allen, a new friend who had been with Ann in hospital called for them very early. They were to spend the day with her while Lena and Reg and Lyndon settled in. Mrs Allen lived about a mile away in a direction not connected by tram.

There was a fog, creeping up over the land from Darling Harbour and White Bay. Through the thick air, the blasts of the early-morning factory whistles shrilled suddenly, to be answered by the hoots of the tiny launches and cargo boats on the harbour. The old brick houses loomed out of the greyness and suddenly Mandy was conscious of life as she had never been before. She sensed the thousands of people in the streets surrounding her, the milling teeming life of a city, elbows jostling one another on the footpaths, feet trampling the dusty asphalt. And in that moment there was born in her a love for the city, for its narrow streets and crowded houses, for all humanity, struggling, stupid, its vices and its virtues, that was to remain with her for the rest of her life.

PART TWO

Let Us Pray

Mandy learnt in the next five years a great deal about the city. She learnt to accept as normal crowded, cramped terraces, the khaki footboard trams packed tight with peak-hour passengers, the screaming traffic of Parramatta Road, the cash-and-carry groceries, the syndicated cake shops, the arsenal of Woolworths.

Everything in those years could be bought in bulk, butter lifted with wooden pats straight from the big box so that it reached the table with the crenellated parallel lines running along it, tins of peaches sold at cheaper rates with tins of synthetic cream thrown in, cream cheese, little moist snowballs wrapped in greaseproof. On Saturday mornings, the butchers' shops tempted the under-privileged with shoulders of lamb, eleven pence each, while three dozen pieces of fruit could be bought for one and six. Shopping was a matter of discrimination, of picking up a special here, a special there.

Every Friday Reg received ten shillings housekeeping money from Nena, took the old suitcase and walked from one end of Parramatta Road, Leichhardt, to its junction with Johnson Street, Annandale. Sometimes Mandy and Caroline walked with him. Patient, no longer demanding but always hopeful. And he rarely failed them. The odd penny was usually there for the flat brown biscuit still warm from the oven that one of the bakers turned out for a halfpenny each. By unspoken consent Caroline and Mandy never mentioned the cakes to Nena. Not after the day Mandy dropped the ice-cream on her best summer frock. As she watched Reg's frantic efforts to clean the spot with his handkerchief, his fear that the family would discover he had squandered a full

sixpence, Mandy realised fully how much life had changed since the spendthrift days of cricket matches. And she sensed something of the tragedy that had overtaken the generous money-spending man.

In other ways, too, the consciousness of the national slump pressed in on the young. There were the long queues of men stretching half a mile along Balmain Road waiting in varying degrees of optimism for nine o'clock, for the factory or the shop that had advertised a single vacancy.

And there were the dogs. Mandy had known strays before but never in the long lean gangs that frequented the streets of the closely-settled suburbs, dogs nosing at garbage tins, tearing at refuse in the gutters, the unwanted dogs, the dog turned loose because his licence could not be bought, whose food was a burden. Dog after dog, skinny and alive, or dead in the gutters. A brown kelpie shivering between the wheels of the old cart, trying to evade the rope twisted around his neck waiting for the quick jerk of the shafts to the ground designed to end his miserable existence by hanging. Mandy hurried past, too sick to watch, fearful in case they succeeded before her very eyes. She could do nothing. She was learning that it was useless to entice the homeless to follow her. There was no food for an extra dog at home. The misery in the brown kelpie eyes she tried to repress to an unreceptive subconscious.

But the eternal pattern of living continued, leaving little time for morbidity. Nena received an appointment at a school over a mile away. Worried by the thought of her small sisters returning to an empty house every afternoon, she took them with her. By the time the washing up was completed it was usually twenty to nine. A mile in fifteen minutes. Mandy and Caroline learnt quickly not to complain. They ran along behind Nena's firm brisk strides like a couple of novices behind a trained sheep dog.

Their new monument to learning was a bleak two-storied affair of red brick. Apart from the infants' section where a charming old garden still flowered spasmodically around a converted church hall, the entire playground was asphalt. A few straggly peppercorn trees, the trade mark of the New South Wales education department, struggled fitfully to survive on the edges of a tarred jungle.

The population was mixed. There remained a stratum of good middle-class homes in the Stanmore-Petersham area supplying a respectable well-kept fairly intelligent set of children reinforced by the numbers that unemployment was driving out into the cheaper living areas. The other half were street urchins, quickly maturing, semi-neglected, with sexual knowledge well beyond their years, culled either from a haphazard promiscuity in their own home or straight from the streets.

Mandy, used to her own companions from birth, to a school peopled by those with whom she had grown up, felt as if she had been thrown on to the ever-moving floor of a Coney Island nightmare. She and Caroline, while separated for classes, clung frantically to one another during the breaks. The teacher carefully introduced them to what she called the nicer girls, but the latter obviously found them superfluous. The initial friendly overtures came from the group that the authorities despised. 'Come and play skips,' said the 'not so nice' and in their warm, unquestioning friendliness the two children found some comfort. It was not, however, to last. Authority intervened with reprimands and somewhat mysterious accounts of the danger involved in mixing with the 'wrong' children. In time Mandy did find her friends in the other group, the ties of background, and intelligence, plus her own quick imagination, allowing her to penetrate the inner circle, yet her initiation into the mateship of the city area taught her a lesson.

She missed, too, the automatic trust in her integrity and ability that she had won in her old school. Mandy Brown was again nobody. Was she even a nice girl? Her disillusionment began the first week. The sum was difficult, unpleasant, the sort that required a great deal of internal computation of money, ending with a list of individual items to be totalled. Mandy worked fast, too fast and it was not until time had almost run out that she noted the error in her addition. Hastily she wrote the correct version over the incorrect, the final result being an untidy splodge of ink.

The teacher carefully worked it through on the board and Mandy happily ticked her answer.

'Hands up those who have it right.'

Mandy raised her arm.

'Show me your book, Mandy Brown.'

Full of confidence she walked across the room and handed in her exercise.

The woman looked at it for a moment, then turned to the waiting child.

'Only nasty girls cheat,' she said.

Mandy looked bewildered.

'We don't want that sort of girl here, do we girls?'

An obedient response came from the massed children, the ritual of the school pulpit.

Tears sprang into Mandy's eyes.

'But I got it right,' she said.

'Come, come, Mandy,' the woman said enjoying her discomfiture. 'Don't lie as well. Anyone can see you wrote in this answer after I worked it on the blackboard. Just look at it.'

Sheer violent rage seized Mandy, rage that, in her infancy, would have sent her head against the floorboards but which now expressed itself in a curious melting sensation of trembling limbs and blurring of vision.

'I didn't!' she said. 'I didn't! You've no right to say that. You're a wicked woman.'

Sobs shook her body.

'Take your book and sit down,' said the teacher coldly. 'And learn to control your temper. Seeing you're a new girl, we'll forgive you this time, but if it happens again I'll send you to the headmaster.'

Trembling with anger, Mandy returned to her seat, aware of the gentle sniggers of the virtuous behind her back.

'I'll show them,' she muttered.

It gave her great pleasure to beat the lot of them in the first monthly test, to see the little pale blue ribbon pinned on her own tunic. Life had its compensations. She and Caroline soon found every inch of vacant land within reach of home. Holidays were spent playing cricket and chasing with the Allens or picnicking on a large tract of waste land that they called the moors.

And then there was church. Now that Nena was in charge of the household, their religious instruction began in dead earnest and this time Mandy responded. The Methodist Sunday-school she now attended was broad in outlook and generous in spirit. In the wide high-roofed building dominated at one end by an enormous pipe organ, Mandy found some peace. There was a pivot of security here, an orbit to replace her lost garden. The church congregation was composed of practical people. Their annual anniversary was an event, a decorated festival of song, capped off by a secular concert and a near universal prize-giving. While catering to their spiritual needs they implicitly recognised the material aspirations of their young charges. Picnics were a gay launch trip preceded by a bag of free sweets, a dipping, pleasant journey down Iron Cove, under the new bridge, across the harbour to the tree-strewn rocky shores of Athol Gardens. On arrival there was a sticky bun, unbuttered but fresh,

impregnated with currants plus an orange to stave off the pangs of hunger till the teachers and mothers had time to butter and spread the sandwiches in the big tin-roofed hall.

Classed as a mission, they prayed and moralised but they also succoured and loved. One Christmas Eve, Mandy walked into the little mission hall at the rear of the main building hugging to her breast a bundle of cast-off clothing for redistribution. In front of the mission sister, a jolly-faced, grey-haired woman, was a stack of books – *Empire Annual for Girls*, *The Boarders at the Chalet*, *Fun at the Grange*, the escapist romantic tales of boarding school, the ten-year-old's dream of paradise. Mandy's eyes opened in fascinated desire. She loved books, she had read through every ancient volume in her own home, all the Victorian and Edwardian masochism that paraded under the titles such as *Nothing to Nobody*.

The sister watched the dark-eyed intense face. 'This is the child,' she thought.

'Thanks, Mandy,' she said taking delivery of the parcel 'By the way, we've just been given a lot of books. Would you like to pick out a few? As a Christmas present.'

Mandy almost said yes, then shame caught her. This was charity. The books were meant for poor children. They were not poor children. What would Nena say if she took them? She nodded a negative, too upset to speak. Sister saw the indecision in the eyes but being wise ignored it, concealing her own knowledge beneath bustling activity.

'Well, here you are then,' she said thrusting a pile at Mandy. 'Couple of good school stories in this lot. No good giving them to children who can't read. You're a great reader, I know. Your sister told me.'

Mandy struggled the half mile home, the precious volumes clutched in her arms, her feelings alternating between pleasure and apprehension. She crept in the back door. Her knees felt weak but she made no attempt to

conceal the volumes in her own bedroom. Mandy had courage combined with an innate honesty that shrank from the sheer embarrassment of uncovered deception. After a momentary hesitation, she showed the books to Nena.

And Nena smiled, inwardly relieved that a kind of fate had supplied her avid, somewhat troubled younger sister with reading matter.

'That's good of Sister,' she said. 'You and Caroline will enjoy them, I know. I had an *Empire Annual* once.'

Warmed by Nena's understanding, Mandy smiled too. But in her general development Mandy was far from secure. Her temper, always tempestuous, seemed quicker in flaring up than ever before. In every situation she saw an insult. She resented deeply the now obvious dependence of Nena on Lyndon, for the latter could supply a semi-adult companionship, whereas she, Mandy, could not. Lyndon still favoured Caroline and in quarrels between the two younger children. Mandy felt, rightly or wrongly, that Lyndon was adroit at turning Nena's wrath on her rather than Caroline. But then Caroline was quieter in disposition, less violent, the changes in her life becoming apparent in an increased nervousness rather than an increased turbulence. Whereas Mandy no longer feared the absence of her loved ones, the death of Ann destroying for all time her terror of loss, Caroline now suffered extreme anxiety if her family were not present. She could not bear to be left in a train carriage while her father went for a minute's stroll. The bells and whistles beat an anxious crescendo of departure in her ears. But she revolted less openly than Mandy. She could resent, she was deeply obstinate, ready to hide or run away from her fears but she was not violent or self-destructive.

While Caroline obeyed, yet went her own way, Mandy resisted. Convinced she was no longer loved, she stormed and sulked over trifles, walked off alone across the dark moors at

a fancied insult, sat in the middle of tram lines to convince her family that they had driven her to the final desperate step. She was approaching puberty fast and, quite untutored in the problems of sex, had no way of understanding that her own violence was not necessarily eternal. Only in the Bible did she feel perfect understanding. Urged on by teachers, the vicarious masochism of the Cross became her own 'I will not leave you comfortless and lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world.' 'Everlasting peace.' 'Jesus loves you.' These were the words she wanted to hear.

She began to pray, long and earnestly, her anxieties becoming part and parcel of her new life. God would take care of her and not only her, all the dogs and cats and extraneous objects of affection that comprised her personal universe. All she had to do was ask. And so she prayed, not only for the safety of the family but also for every single animal that she met on the streets of the city; the dog with the plumed tail, the foxie caught on Parramatta Road, the grey tom that strayed along the slummiest streets, the kelpie with the rope about his neck. And if the family was sometimes puzzled by the length of her devotions they did not interfere.

'Our devout daughter,' murmured Reg ironically to Grandmother Vicky. 'Prayer is the answer to all her problems.'

'Perhaps,' replied Vicky tartly, 'you could have occasionally tried the same remedy yourself.' For in the despair of unemployment Reg no longer made any pretence of being interested in religion.

But if Vicky sometimes feared for the eternal welfare of most of her nine sons, she did not preach. Into their homes, she brought only her goodness.

For Mandy, she remained a stable point of love, her Christmas visit being still one of the long-awaited events of

the year. Aged seventy-eight she walked a mile in the heat, her habitual black print covering her black-stockinged legs to the ankle, her black veiled hat pinned firmly on top of her long white hair, above the wonderful blue eyes – just to hear them sing a duet in the Sunday-school anniversary.

At the beginning of 1914, Mandy started high school and a bigger, more varied world opened before her. Aunt Margaret, still generous, bought her uniform just as she had bought the uniform for every graduating niece or nephew over the past four years. Her fierce, humorous grey eyes snapped with decision.

‘Buy the best, Nena,’ she said. ‘I can afford it.’

And Mandy, fingering the soft silk of her brand new blouses, saw through the toughness to the golden core of her aunt’s character.

Mandy loved her new school. All her sisters had been there, Lyndon having just completed her Leaving the preceding year. The main building, stately and colonial-built with the spaciousness that Macquarie lavished on all he touched, overlooked the new highway. The old Moreton Bay figs, pendulous with years, spread across the over-small playing area. The age of the place that repelled the critical attracted her. She felt as if life had at last begun.

But in other ways the depression was not yet beaten. Reg was still at home and he was joined now by Lyndon who found it impossible in the black year to take up any of the professions that attracted her. Chemists were not accepting girls as apprentices, not even girls with first class passes in mathematics and science. Why, they were even turning down boys. Teacher-training scholarships went only to the top hundred or so in the State. Graduates with first-class honours remained unemployed or taught all subjects for a pound a week in minor private schools from southern Victoria to north Queensland. Lyndon, interrupted

in her school career by periodic asthma and all the domestic upsets of her home life, failed to enter the select group. Anyhow she did not want to teach. And so for six months she stayed home too, taking over some of the housework from Reg who concentrated on the cooking. In this period he even made the bread; he and Mrs Allen both managed to obtain some of the hops necessary for this process, the crusty loaves comforting him with their yeasty reminiscence of his own mother's kitchen.

In the meantime they walked everywhere. They were familiar with any cricket ground within a radius of three miles. They watched Bradman at Birchgrove, six miles there and back; Barnes, young and ambitious at Petersham; Chilvers, neglected by State selectors, at Glebe.

Reg had lost his faith in religion, but it was finally the church that found him another job. Their minister at that time was a lean, rock-faced man with a taste for literature who spoke assiduously over the heads of his congregation for forty-five minutes every Sunday. His sons he named Shakespeare and Byron, his daughters, Cordelia and Estella. His own study was lined with books from ceiling to floor, and he could, when he chose, tell a story with the hushed dramatic power of the true narrator. While his philosophical theology bored, his story-telling charmed, the congregation hung breathless and moved as he narrated Bret Harte's tale of 'Roaring Camp' to a church full of children.

At Conference he fought for individualism against organised wowserism. In days when smoking was still taboo, he lit up himself and made his points at assemblies of his colleagues by thumping the stem of his pipe on the arm of his chair. Many said he was a bad minister. He rarely visited. He found books more interesting than his working-class congregation. But he had sympathy and understanding. He liked Nena. He approved of her fight to educate her sisters.

When one of the members of a sister church happened to mention that his firm needed an accountant he remembered Reg even though he had seen him in his church only for the Sunday-school anniversary.

At the same time Lyndon started work in the office of an American firm at seventeen and six per week. She determined to become a fully-qualified secretary immediately and began the long process of night tuition.

So by the family faced the future with a new hope. They had already changed their first house for a nicer one in the same street with lighter, gayer rooms and a slightly bigger garden.

They were to change houses many times. They were to learn by bitter experience that the tenant in the world of the 'thirties had very few rights. Some people who rented houses were lucky, staying in the same place, setting down roots to turn the area belonging by law to someone else into their own unchallenged province. But the population, turned adrift into industrial areas by the depression, was rarely so fortunate. Sometimes the owners died. It happened to the Browns repeatedly, so often in fact that Reg dryly remarked, 'They'll blackball us soon in sheer self-defence.'

Death as a rule meant resale and if the new owner wished to inhabit his own premises, the tenant had no option but to move out. Perhaps, too, Nena's disposition multiplied the changes, a restlessness that sought a security not to be found within any four walls, that wearied of the cramped backyards, terminating in brick outhouses, the walls of nearby factories or stables, the scraggy palm or treeless square of earth. Perhaps subconsciously she sought to escape from the responsibilities of life that had descended so immutably on her young shoulders. Wherever they went, the billiards table and the piano went too, their hostages to fortune but permanent incubi in the choice of living-places. They learnt to play billiards with their cues perpendicular to the wall, poking out of windows, angled under the shelves of cupboards. Finally they settled into a single-fronted cottage in the pleasanter section of the district. Its huddled exterior was deceptive. Inside, the rooms were large and pleasant even if ornate, the blue lounge room carrying clusters of pale red plaster roses across the edges of the ceiling. But best of all in

its minute yard someone had planted a garden; wax plant, lavender, rosemary struggled for existence around a mandarin and loquat tree.

Nineteen-thirty-four, thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven, an everchanging yet monotonous vista, pieced and broken by the transitory pattern of existence, events emerging here and there with a greater clarity, a deeper poignancy: the illness of Caroline that brought them home in undue haste from a long-awaited holiday beside the bays of Broken Bay. For a month Caroline, unable to walk, endured the probings of a puzzled medical profession, before the diagnosis of poliomyelitis was reached. Finally she returned home, paler, thinner, her baby chubbiness gone forever, but fortunately with no ostensible ill-effects.

The period was marked too by a growing bid on Lyndon's part for independence. In a world peopled almost entirely by women, she developed an increasing desire for a universe broader, more romantic than the one that now encompassed her. Would she dare assert her right to an independent holiday, away from the 'family', the unit that Nena held firmly together in a dutiful hold? Her clothes became more sophisticated, modelled on the competent, efficient American-shaped business women who comprised her daily world. Her make-up grew brighter and finally, in the face of Nena's unspoken disapproval, she had her hair permed.

Caroline presumed on her sister's devotion in a riot of mockery.

'What do you put that silly stuff on your lips for? Do you think you look pretty? My, aren't we smart?'

Lyndon endured it with an occasional outburst of protest. She appealed to Mandy for support and even though Mandy's views on lipstick were at this stage as Nonconformist and juvenile as Caroline's she comforted her sister by telling her how pretty she looked. After all it wasn't her business, and

Lyndon was attractive in appearance even when daubed with powder and paint. It was Lyndon's first recognition of the tolerance of her younger sister and while it could later arouse her enmity when exercised on behalf of those whose actions Lyndon opposed, she was never closer to Mandy than the times her own need for understanding led her to seek her sister's confidence.

Lyndon's business course was now completed. She had been promoted to a secretarial post in her old firm. She hovered on the brink of further evening adventures. University? Perhaps. In a year or two.

And the merry-go-round of life again spun Reg back into the mad whirl of existence after it had appeared to cast him off for all time, so that gradually the same old patterns re-emerged. With money in his pocket, however little, there were again the comforts of the evening shout, the possibility of a fortune on an odd horse. Lyndon, pursued by the fears of her adolescence, watched in vulture-like anticipation for her father's relapse. He always worked late, he said, but she could not mistake the grey-suited figure, the typical felt hat, slipping through the doors of the hotel as her tram jerked to a shuddering stop. What ought she to do? Surely Nena ought to say something. But Lyndon, faced with the depths of Nena's reserve regarding her father's activities, hesitated and finally confided her problem to her younger sister instead, who watched fascinated for their father's collapse. But their father did not collapse. Perhaps if there had been less puritan disapproval Reg's intake might have appeared negligible, no more than that of the average worker, but their deep-rooted convictions that strong drink was indeed raging, coupled with Reg's own innate adolescent belief of the same order, intensified a habit into sin.

And sometimes it was not negligible. His irritation with the drawbacks of a life that had no permanent wife in the

background, of days when it was not possible to find a clean shirt, of hours when no one bothered about him at all, found expression in a moroseness that dominated, when enhanced by whisky, the evening meal and for Mandy and Caroline Sunday morning breakfast as well, for Nena exercised a prerogative born of authority and, with Lyndon, slept in. Sometimes Mandy resented Nena's inclusion of Lyndon in all her rights. While they slumbered or read, she and Caroline received the backwash of their father's Saturday afternoon conviviality. If they had to get up, to endure unprotesting the half-cooked meat that their father slapped on their plates as a reproach against Nena's non-appearance, why should Lyndon escape?

But then it was not all shadow. Sometimes the few whiskies increased his geniality instead of depressing it. Everyone, even Caroline, knew when the horse had won. The shoulder of boiling bacon, the immense paper bag of Fijian bananas and the first-grade fruit that preceded him through the front door, the laughter, the triumph in the grey eyes, the creator of fantasy, the charming unforgettable man. Reg Brown — universal Santa Claus.

At these moments Mandy longed to emulate him, to spend her own few pence on a lavish gesture to all. When her grandmother came in the heat of summer to care for Caroline after she returned from hospital, Mandy, home early with an afternoon excused from sport, spent her own carefully saved shilling, culled from a mere twopence per week, on ice-creams for the three of them. Vicky opened the door and Mandy, like Reg, entered holding her offerings before her.

'Ah,' said Vicky, 'the good Samaritan.' Then she kissed Mandy and added gently, 'just the thing for a hot day.'

But Mandy had not missed the touch of irony in the first words or the inexplicable reflection of sorrow in the blue eyes.

She could not possibly have glimpsed the complexity of her grandmother's thought, but she felt curiously deflated. Perhaps . . . perhaps, generosity like this was not the ultimate. She became conscious of her own desire to please, to bask in the sunlight of approval and the knowledge was gall to her.

But in all directions Mandy was growing up. As her school world expanded so did her curiosity. As many of her friends were as untutored as herself, they sought the solutions to the problems of regeneration together. Birth?

'But how?' said Mandy. 'How does it begin?'

'I don't know,' said Jane. 'It has something to do with periods.'

'I know a bit,' said Sue. 'But it's not nice to talk about it. I looked up womb in the dictionary.'

Mandy raced home. The result was somewhat circular - the uterus, a cavity, a receptacle. Turning to uterus, she returned to her starting point - womb, female organ of regeneration. It was not a particularly good dictionary. On the vital issue of origins, Mandy felt as ignorant as ever. Yet it was not all loss. As she read through her Bible, the whole script to be covered in two years under the auspices of the Scripture Union, the word 'womb' glowed with a new light, part of the mysterious sexual content of birth.

In the same way their problems of art and religion were probed and discussed, real knowledge eluding them, scraps and pieces strung illogically together to form an exciting if incoherent whole. Most of the girls took God for granted - something in which all respectable people believed but a few of them argued in a fervour of emotion for a personal recognition or, in a rare case, outright rejection of the theistic thesis.

'You don't really believe in the end of the world, not really,' said Joan.

'Why not?' said Mandy. 'All things end.'

'But brimstone and angels. It's so unintelligent.'

'No doubt,' said Ruth; 'if you think of God as some awful fearsome ogre. I don't. It's a matter of love and purpose. This world couldn't possibly be everything.'

'Why not? You can't say heaven's real just because you want it to be. What do you think, Mandy?'

'I don't know,' said Mandy; 'I don't know much about ends and purposes. God is something I feel, like stars and poetry.'

'"Ode to the West Wind"' said Jane.

'That's it,' said Mandy, and if for Mandy there was no clear distinction between the vision of God and the new experience of emotional impulse found in Shelley's poetry it hardly mattered. She could scarcely explain to the pimply, freckled, highly intelligent little girls who were part of her daily life, that God was a refuge, a replacement for a lost garden and a mother that she no longer thought about.

By the depression had more or less run its course. On their maps, they were already beginning to plot the advance of Hitler's armies. Mandy listened fascinated, as their history teacher prophesied the path of future German and Japanese aggression, right to the wheat fields of the Ukraine and shores of Australia. And in the school-room whose brick walls were grimed with age she felt the first apprehension of the conflict in store for her own generation. The rights and wrongs of the Versailles Treaty, the Manchurian invasion, Abyssinia, Nazi ideology, the integrity of Communist Russia, the Spanish Civil War. They tossed ideas and opinions from one to another, arguing over the inevitability of realities that were already casting their shadow before and mingling them with ingenious, if not very learned, opinions on the madness of Hamlet.

Then was the brink of the new world, the world of thought and the world of war, but it also brought changes of

more immediate concern to Mandy. With the end of the depression the great influx to the cities became a definite exodus. Allens had moved out eighteen months ago to one of the semi-rural districts that hovered on the edges of the longest tram routes in Sydney.

It was a wet day in July. The rain beat against the bare paddocks that surrounded the Allens' new house, turned the dirt roads to mud. It was cosy eating scones beside the Allens' fire. Mandy and Caroline played carpet cricket happily with the Allen children. Lyndon was reading the *Herald* scanning the advertisement columns. Perhaps somewhere there was a house, not too dear, not too far from work in a more elegant suburb than their present one, a house to which she could bring her friends. She had no real hope, she did not think Nena would listen even if she found one; still, it was a wet afternoon, she was a little bored – a girl of twenty wasting her time with staid adults and mere children while Mrs Allen and Nena discussed Ben Allen's school problems and Reg and Mr Allen talked about football prospects. What a life!

Her finger ran down the column: 'Redwood, double-fronted brick cottage, good grounds, rent twenty-seven shillings per week.'

Redwood: only two miles from Allens', on a main train line. They were already paying twenty-five shillings; after all why not? Slowly, half aloud, Lyndon began to read.

Mrs Allen, a little lonely in her new rural suburb, also thought, why not?

'Let's have a look any way,' she said. 'It will be something to do.'

And Nena, restless, tired of her present surroundings, looked at the eager faces around her. After all, why not?

Within half an hour, they were standing in front of it, looking at it. The rain beat down on the lead-lighted windows and lit up the sweep of grass at the back.

'Perhaps,' said Nena.

'It's solidly built,' said Reg.

'We have to move out some time,' said Lyndon.

Caroline stood in the front garden, awed and silent. Fernleigh was only a memory. She had been barely eight when they left it – for Caroline reality was crowded streets, narrow cottages, tiny yards.

'We're not really going to live in that lovely house, are we?' she asked, her voice caught midway between disbelief and hope.

'Yes,' said Nena, 'we are,' all doubts resolved by the child's ecstasy.

Mandy ran her hands along the soft bark of a plum tree and felt the old, almost forgotten, thrill of sensuous satisfaction.

The transfer was soon achieved, new train tickets purchased, train passes arranged for school, everything. Now they were actually living in the bright, pleasant rooms. Soon, even Caroline took depth and space for granted and Nena and Lyndon began to notice that the place was not quite so new, that the dining-room and veranda needed painting.

The next step was the quest for social contacts, the renewal of church attendance. The move raised for Mandy a problem of conscience. With a deepening of religious conviction was growing perturbation that so far she had existed outside her own church. She was a baptised member of no Christian community. Only one sect could fulfil her need at this juncture. Somewhere she had to return to the faith of her fathers.

At Redwood there was a Baptist as well as a Methodist church. The ties of loyalty to the church that had comforted her in her need, and provided her with some of the most enjoyable moments in the past six years were great, but there was for Mandy now a deeper, more urgent demand. Full

fellowship in Christ implied baptism and her paternal faith offered the easiest way of obtaining it.

'I'm going to the Baptist Sunday-School,' she said casually one Saturday afternoon, throwing her straw hat across the old settee.

To her surprise, Lyndon looked up sharply, a scowl of hostility disfiguring the curve of her face. She had already met some of the Methodist younger set, male and female, and her world, starved for so long, almost six years, of suitable boy friends, at last offered a promise of youthful pleasures.

'You'll go where you're sent, my lady.'

'Oh,' said Mandy, flipping the unfortunate hat in Lyndon's direction, 'will I? And who's sending me? You?'

'O.K.,' said Lyndon, flipping the hat back again. 'Be rude, as usual. But you'll have to do as Nena says, won't she, Nena? Personally, I'm going to the Methodist. We've been Methodist for eight years now.'

Mandy looked at her sister with scorn. She despised the appeal to Nena. She was aware that Lyndon was uneasy. And Mandy knew why. It was bluff. Lyndon was not really sure of Nena's support. In matters of conscience Nena could reverse her normal alliances.

Mandy perched her hat on top of her plaits.

'Go where you like, Lyndon. I won't miss you. I don't interfere with you, so you can leave me alone. I want to go to the Baptist.'

'Well, you'll be going all by yourself then,' retorted Lyndon.

'Very well, I'll go all by myself then.'

Nena, who had so far remained silent, looked gravely at Mandy.

'Why do you want to be a Baptist, Mandy?' she asked.

Mandy found it difficult to explain.

'It's our own religion,' she said. 'I've never been baptised. I want to go back. To find out.'

And Nena, with her own sensitivity to emotion, understood the child's impulse, the need for consecration. She let her go, in fact, came with her. But Lyndon also stood her ground. She remained a Methodist and in another year or two took Caroline with her, being swept away into the social ideas, God's kingdom on earth, of the modernist movement, which was where Mandy and Lyndon differed. The humanitarian call sufficed Lyndon. Her own childhood, the vision of poverty, drew her to a concern for the under-privileged which was to find fulfilment in social service. Mandy, on the other hand, wanted to know God. She was one of the eternal hunters of the Holy Grail. She had some of the mystic's need for identification. She searched for a vision that would realise her own spiritual nature, satisfy her emotional intensity. She turned now to find it in the ascetic doctrine of Puritanism, in the apparent denial of the material, but in fact she found less realisation of her need than Lyndon. The barrenness of her new contacts repulsed her, the self-complacency of the saved jarred on a nature that six years in an industrial suburb had stirred to an awareness of human suffering. Unlike Lyndon, she felt the need of personal salvation but unlike too many of her fellow Baptists, she could not pass by the poor with the Pharisee's prayer on her lips. Perhaps a richer, more aesthetic religion could have secured her. As it was, she had to grope, uncertain of purpose but sure of God.

Her intellectual ambitions were not nearly so self-defeating. As they broadened she began to understand her own purposes. She now knew quite definitely that she wanted to go to university. In some form or other that had been her aim for some time. By the second year, she had informed a delighted headmistress, herself a feminist of no mean standing, that she desired to be a barrister but that ambition had

been replaced in the third year by a more idealistic one. Spurred on by a representative of the Australian Inland Mission, she decided to be a flying-doctor.

As she sat with Reg on the upper deck of one of the new red buses headed for Aunt Margaret's, she watched telegraph poles of Anzac Parade flash past, but for Mandy they were the outposts of the Overland Telegraph: the desperately sick patient, the intense heat, the blinding sandstorm, the heroine descending from the skies at the last moment, operation with a kitchen knife on the spot, the grateful farewells of the homestead family.

When she told the headmistress her latest ambition, the mistress, while relegating the barrister to the heap of forsaken projects with some regret, rallied well and treated the topic with the eagerness that the fourteen-year-old obviously expected.

'Your aim, then, is matriculation. A medical degree first, six years roughly and finally, of course, you'll have to learn to fly.'

Mandy nodded gravely, and if the head enjoyed with the staff a good laugh when they met around the conference table, it was to her eternal credit that she betrayed no amusement in the presence of the child.

But the missionary influence wore off. Her aunt moved to a train line and trains did not create the same illusion of flight. Mandy was growing up. By the time they moved to Redwood she no longer wanted to be a barrister or a flying-doctor. She wanted simply to go to university and take an arts course, to study English, history, perhaps philosophy. Maybe she would teach; perhaps she might become a diplomat, but basically she had no professional ambition and if such lack of purpose were barely consistent with a life dedicated to God, Mandy did not yet recognise the fact. What she did realise were the pressures of economics. She needed not only to

matriculate but also to win an exhibition or better still a bursary. Even then she would need family help to survive and Reg was not earning a first-rate income. Study hours became longer, hard work more imperative. And in spite of the fresh air of Redwood, the new extended garden, tennis with church-groups, Mandy was not well. The strains of spiritual problems, long study and family tensions combined to increase her irritation with the sheer stresses of living. Her opposition to Lyndon and even Nena became sharper, more defined.

'The kids can go,' said Lyndon who had come up for the week-end to share the summer holiday by the sea.

It was dark and a thunderstorm was impending. Nena had run out of a mixture that she was taking for a cold. The nearest chemist was half a mile away.

'Mandy,' called Lyndon, 'you'll have to go to the chemist for Nena. I'll wash up and Caroline can wipe.'

'Why should I go?' thought Mandy. 'Trust Lyndon to pick on me. What right has she to come up here and order me around. I'm fifteen now. Let Lyndon go herself. The washing up's my job.'

'It's church hours,' she said aloud, not even bothering to raise her eyes from the book she was reading. 'Everything shuts then.'

Nena, not feeling well and angered by her nonchalance, intervened.

'You can knock them up,' she said tartly.

'In that case,' said Mandy, 'it would be better if Lyndon went. She was flirting with the chemist this morning. And there's always Caroline.'

'It's too far for Caroline in the dark,' said Lyndon.

'Then it's too far for me too,' said Mandy. 'I'm not much older than Caroline. You always manage to forget that, don't you, Lyndon?'

Lyndon turned to Nena.

'It's quite obvious that she doesn't want to get your medicine. Obliging little thing.'

Mandy bit her lip. She looked hard at her book but she was not reading a word. The print blurred in front of her.

The next moment the volume was flung out of her hand and Nena hit her hard on the ear.

'You lazy, ungrateful little girl,' she stormed. 'Who do you think is paying for your holiday?'

'Not Lyndon,' said Mandy.

'How dare you!' said Nena. 'How dare you speak to me like that. You're getting too big for your boots with all your books and grand ideas. And you have the nerve to pretend you're religious. If I tell you to go a message, you go.'

'You didn't tell me,' said Mandy reasonably, but her voice was shaking. 'You didn't even ask me. I'd have gone if you had. Lyndon ordered me to go. She always picks on me. Haven't you noticed? She always has. Ever since I can remember.'

'Don't talk rubbish,' said Nena. 'Lyndon knew I wanted the medicine. She suggested you go while we washed up and you made this fuss. Too busy reading as usual.'

'Yes,' said Mandy, insolently. 'Too busy reading. Not concerned about your cold like Lyndon. Very well: if she's so concerned why didn't she go herself?'

'Because,' said Nena, 'I like to talk to adults occasionally instead of ignorant little girls.'

Seizing Mandy by the shoulders she shook her hard.

Sheer rage seized Mandy, incoherence clogged her speech.

'It's not true,' she said; 'it's not true. Anyway, why didn't you give Lyndon the prescription this morning? you needed it then. Why should I have to go out now, when the shop is shut into the bargain? I hate thunderstorms, I hate

them more than Caroline or Lyndon or you. You know that. I hate you too and I hate Lyndon. I hate her, do you hear? I hate all of you. I'm going away and I'm never coming back.'

Nena slapped her again.

'Go away,' she said.

'We don't want you,' said Lyndon.

Mandy ran out into the night. Already the lightning darted in jagged lines across the sky, but anger beat down terror. She ran long the road to the beach and finally lay sobbing, her head buried in the cold sand.

'I'll never go back,' she wept, 'never, never.' But as soon as her anger receded fear rose. The night terror that had haunted her babyhood, intensified by her own imagination, still had power to chill her. She peopled the darkness with horror which, coupled with the physical fear of lightning, drove her back to the house like a lost sheep, to creep through the back door and into bed.

The next morning she went for Nena's medicine while Lyndon fished from the little wharf dressed in the latest cut of playsuit and decorated beach sombrero. When she returned Nena, regretful of her own anger, hugged her and Mandy dissolved in tears. But even though she wept and let Nena comfort her, part of Mandy still resisted. She did not hate Nena. She loved her but she resented her authority, she was jealous of Nena's attachment to Lyndon. I could love her so much, she thought, but already she sensed she was not indispensable to her sister. One day I'll go away and never come back. Never. She can keep old Lyndon. And Mandy laughed to herself. She knew innately that Lyndon would stay only as long as it suited her.

Increasing ill-health made Mandy even touchier; bronchitis, styes, boils. What was wrong with Mandy? 'Super-nervy, super-sensitive, overworked,' said the doctor. Nena, worn out herself by years of worry, found it hard to

cope with the problem. She wrote to Catriona and Catriona suggested a solution.

‘Send Mandy to us for six months.’

To Mandy the suggestion sounded like heaven. The previous year Bob had bought into a little practice in North Queensland, a tiny sleepy town between Mackay and Townsville, stranded on a pretty harbour and girded by ocean beaches.

The weather should quell bronchitis easily, the tropics calm the spirit. What could be nicer? Bob was pleased too. He had seen very little of his small sisters-in-law over the past six years. He and Catriona now had a boy and girl of their own. They would love to have Mandy.

Everyone agreed it would be the very thing to restore the child to health and happiness.

Owing to Reg's obstinacy and his innate belief in the wickedness of mankind the trip was more wonderful than Mandy had anticipated. Reg insisted that she travel by boat. No one could guarantee the safety of an adolescent on a train. She might end in one of those nasty box carriages. In short, Reg was quite determined that his sixteen-year-old daughter was not to run the risk of rape. And so after a somewhat acrimonious exchange of letters with Bob who was paying the fare, boat it was. First class interstate steamer to Brisbane, cargo boat from Brisbane north.

And so, while Chamberlain was carrying out his historic mission in Munich, Mandy waved good-bye to her family. As the ship drew away from the shore she was assailed with a sense of loneliness, more disturbing than any she had previously known. For the first time in her life, she was entirely on her own. The stewardess's care, reinforced by her father's tip, was barely more than perfunctory and so for at least two days there was not a soul to direct her main actions. But as she became acquainted with her table companions, joined in the deck games, played the piano in the comfortable lounge she no longer felt lonely. People were nice.

She was also sustained by an innate simmering excitement. Previously she had never been more than seventy miles from Sydney, yet within twenty four-hours she would be looking at one of the other capitals, a new State. As the ship neared Moreton Bay her heart pounded and because she was just sixteen, she was not disappointed. She loved the glass-house mountains, she loved the winding, friendly river. Never before had she seen houses perched on foundations like stilts,

latticed and ornate. To the critical they appeared too decorative but, with youth to support her, Mandy's eye was not critical, merely appreciative. She had known Bougainvillaea as a tangled purple vine, but she had never before seen it tamed into vivid disciplined hedges, colours that ranged from purple to yellow through a mixture of pinks and oranges and tangerines. She had known banana palms in Sydney, odd struggling anachronisms, robbed of luxuriance by the temperate heat of the southern sun but here they grew with joy and vigour. By the time her hosts, business acquaintances of Lyndon, picked her up at the wharf she was already an enthusiastic admirer of the northern state. The delight of the next two days was entirely her own, a memory to be cherished. While her protectors worked, she explored Brisbane from end to end by herself, climbed the tower of the city hall, peeped at the eternal flame, looked with interest at the unfinished Storey bridge but reserved her love for the gentle undulating curves of Grey Street. She visited the museum with a boy from Gregory Terrace, nephew of her friends, and enjoyed the sweetness of trailing around a new city with a male companion. Both were young. They teased and abused one another happily with no thought of sex, like a pair of young puppies, yet they each found a satisfaction, an excitement in the outings that was new to them.

Mandy was informed by her new friends that Queenslanders were friendlier, warmer than those farther south, with the best, most advanced education system in all Australia, and if she were not convinced of the first proposition and too ignorant to dispute the second, she nevertheless received sufficient proof of the former from their kindness and hospitality to nod a tactful assent.

She was almost sorry when she had to say good-bye, but her first sight of the little boat on which she was to travel north, robbed her of all regret. It was perfect – a tiny, com-

pact diesel-propelled vessel; her decks were spotless, her brass gleaming. She carried only eight passengers and all her cabins were on the deck, double-bunked little rooms painted in a soft blue with delicate etchings hung around the walls.

As they sailed at night, Mandy settled into her bunk with a contented sigh and prepared to dispose of the large box of strawberries that her Brisbane friends had thrust into her hands at the last moment. To her delight she had the top bunk. The other was occupied by an old lady, over sixty, paying her first visit to a daughter and grandchildren long resident in North Queensland.

'Have a strawberry,' said Mandy, peering over the edge.

'Oh dear, no,' said the old lady.

'Go on,' said Mandy. 'They're delicious.'

'My dear child, you'll be sea-sick.'

But oddly enough it was the old lady who was sea-sick, not Mandy. In fact, the first day out all the passengers disappeared into their cabins except Mandy who ate as usual – all except the weevilly porridge – and perched on a plank at the edge of the vessel watched with delight the waves break across the low-cut bow. There were, however, other days. Not even the loveliness of Whitsunday Passage, the joy of bathing on a small island whose blue air was alive with butterflies, could wipe out entirely the waves of homesickness that occasionally overcame her. But such moments had their compensations. The crew did their best to ameliorate them.

The first officer, passing along the deck, happened to notice the odd tear that splashed on to the book held in front of the dark head of his youngest passenger. He sat down beside her.

'I'm just going to have afternoon tea,' he said. 'How about coming along?'

And so in his cabin, he treated her to biscuits and soft drinks until the thoughts of home faded and the romance of travel took their place.

In her honour the second mate condescended to eat in the dining-room and bought her bottles of grape-fruit juice, a flavour that carried Mandy back to the odd-tasting fruit on a little tree at Fernleigh. The chief engineer, a jovial man, teased her unmercifully over their evening game of cribbage.

'My,' he said, 'you are a oner. Bill always eats in his cabin. You must have bewitched him.'

The wireless operator took her to the pictures in Bundaberg while the second mate supervised the loading of sugar down the long shutes into the little ship with a thump, thump of monotonous regularity.

Bundaberg, wet with rain and bright with spring, remained beautiful in memory. And not only Bundaberg but Maryborough and Mackay as well, for the passengers also strove to amuse her with trips around the coastal towns and all too soon, it seemed, Mandy reached her destination.

At first sight Catriona seemed older, staidier. She spoke of herself as a matron, referred to dress styles in terms of seemliness for her age, so that Mandy thought of her as matured beyond her thirty-one or -two years. While still pretty, both she and Bob were stouter than at Fernleigh, but if golf had taken the place of dancing, if bridge parties had replaced evening lectures, they still contrived to enjoy life. There was no Holy Grail beckoning Catriona on to glory, no humanitarian purpose to light her way, but she knew within the confines of respectable society how to keep life moving. Nice people behave in certain accepted ways and Catriona followed, betrayed only occasionally by the temperamental inheritance of the Browns into singularly unorthodox action. She knew how a dentist's wife ought to rotate in country

society, and if a frustrating fight with Bob could lead her to sit on the front fence in the pouring rain as a protest against her subjection to domesticity she rationalised such acts as in some way compatible with her overall outlook.

Both Bob and Catriona were Anglicans. Mandy had by now forgotten Ann's somewhat heathen concepts of life. Reared in an atmosphere where religion mattered even if orthodox tenets were somewhat ignored, she found Catriona's time-serving yet perfectly genuine approach to the church a revelation, a new aspect of human nature even if a disturbing one. The church as a regulator of social behaviour, the cornerstone of bourgeois society, the clearing house for marriage, birth and death, rather than the temple of a living and demanding God. Was it possible people really thought like this?

'We'll have to give a bridge party next week, Bob, for the church. They want a subscription.'

Mandy's ears pricked with interest.

'Do you go to church?' she asked.

She had already been with Catriona a month and so far, even though Mandy dutifully presented herself at the Presbyterian edifice every Sunday, she had not seen Catriona so much as darken a church door.

'Off and on. Whenever it suits me,' said her sister crushingly. 'As long as I send along some money, they aren't too demanding.'

'Do they run bridge parties?' asked the young puritan, vaguely shocked, even though they had always played cards at home.

'Of course not, silly,' laughed Catriona, 'I do.'

'Oh,' said Mandy and left her sister arranging with Bob the means for the material advancement of her religion.

But even though Mandy somewhat despised this approach she was not deceived into thinking it was limited to Catriona's

faith. In spite of herself Mandy was forced to notice more and more the commercial concept of God that hallowed the places of worship.

'Everything in our church has been donated,' said one of the Presbyterians, proudly showing the young visitor over her temporary sanctuary. And sure enough Mandy found on every single pew and pillar a little silver plaque commemorating the giver.

'I wonder if they come to church,' thought Mandy, 'or are these gifts in lieu of attendance, like Catriona's.'

But she didn't ask, she merely prayed for some sort of enlightenment of the tangled motive for worship.

In other ways life with Catriona was gay in a sense she had never before known.

When she gave a party in her honour, Catriona slipped one of her long frocks, a dainty green spotted muslin, over Mandy's head.

'Far too young for me now,' she said smoothing her own silver gown. 'You may as well wear it.'

Then she twisted Mandy's long plaits into a halo around her head. A dash of lipstick lit up the girl's pale face, a dab of rouge brought out the green-grey lights in the pseudo-dark eyes and Mandy looked at the vision of herself in the mirror with a new delight. The evening spun by in a whirl of laughter, barn dances, dodging between the shiny tropical ferns on the wooden-louvred veranda, turning, spinning feet and boys.

Never before had Mandy known the joy of male attention. Schoolboys, yes, for Nena had always taken care to invite the boys of their church to her birthday parties, but these boys looked at her in a new way that sent sparks of feeling along her skin. She enjoyed the attentions of a long graceful, youth of eighteen called Michael who brought her glasses of lemonade and called her 'toots', an appellation that Mandy

in her heart of hearts thought rather vulgar but which was nevertheless fun.

But Mandy had a conscience. The dab of lipstick added vivacity to her face but was it quite fair to use it without telling Nena? True, Catriona was her present protector but Nena was her parental substitute. It seemed to Mandy in the darkness of the night, wakeful beneath the unaccustomed oppressiveness of the huge mosquito net, that it was somewhat deceitful to take up practices of which Nena disapproved. So she wrote and told her, waiting anxiously for the official sanction. It did not come. Instead, Nena, who refused to shoulder the moral problems of others, threw the responsibility back to her.

'Dear Mandy,' she wrote, 'I was glad to hear you are having such a good time and that Catriona and family are well. As you know, lipstick seems to me an unnecessary vanity, a gilding of the lily so to speak. But my views, my dear, are not necessarily your views. You are now sixteen. You must make your own decision. Love, Nena.'

For a short period Mandy struggled with her conscience both from the habit of obedience to Nena and the desire for approval. But the glimpse in the mirror was satisfying, the new recognition of her existence in the boys' eyes was exciting. The lipstick stayed.

Bob and Catriona continued to entertain her with vigour. Visits to the golf-club, games of tennis on courts so hot that that they scorched the soles of her feet, picnics beside the sea. Mandy loved the latter, even though, coming from Sydney, they were a familiar pleasure. She enjoyed helping Catriona pack the lunch basket, she enjoyed dressing Mary and James, the two children, and the car trip along the semi-tropical road. The little town had a number of beaches but none more perfect than a tiny bay shaped like a horse-shoe, tucked between two rocky headlands. The grass and trees

encroached on the sand, a lovely curve of gleaming white on which the large gentle waves threw scraps of coral.

Mandy scuffed her toes in the warm sand and ran across the beach into the warm sea and dived headlong through the long, surflless rollers. The next second she felt a pair of strong arms around her waist and she was lifted bodily out of the water.

'Hey, toots,' said a familiar voice. 'How do you like it?'

'Put me down,' she said indignantly, 'and I'll tell you.'

'Very well,' he said, 'but you have to race me to that rock if I do.'

By the time she reached the rock at the edge of the bay, Michael was already there, his long slanted eyes laughing down at her.

'I thought a Sydneysider would swim faster than that,' he said grasping her wrists and pulling her out of the water.

'I'm no Olympian,' she replied, 'and I'm more used to surfing. Of course you wouldn't know what that was.'

'Say that again,' he said, 'and I'll drop you back in.'

'No, don't,' she said. 'I apologise. Just let me sit on the rock. My, the water's warm.'

'Warm?' he queried. 'I was just thinking how cold it was today.'

'You ought to swim in Sydney,' she replied. 'It's much closer to the Antarctic, I assure you.'

'Solution's obvious,' he replied. 'You'll have to come and live in Queensland. Good idea, don't you think?'

For two weeks, Mandy moved in a dream about Michael. She liked his smile, she liked his long, thin frame. She thought he liked her. Every time she passed the galvanised-iron hardware shop attached to the timber yard owned by his father, he waved cheerily to her over the fence. Then disillusionment set in. She discovered he was the boy friend of a girl with whom she had become friendly, a fragile, blue-eyed

feminine snippet called Jean, not over-bright but very sweet.

'You'll come to the pictures with me, won't you, Mandy?' said Jean. 'Mummy won't mind if I go with you and I can sit with Michael.'

'Michael who?' asked Mandy quickly.

'Michael Burnett, of course. Surely you've met him.'

So Mandy with a regretful sigh became Jean's chaperone, in a fuller sense than she had bargained for. She found the seats were long stretches of canvas, nailed on to a wooden frame, into which a cuddling couple could sink with complete obscurity. Mandy sat rigidly on her end and watched the film, while Michael and Jean kissed in the comfortable darkness at the other end.

'Thanks, toots,' said Michael at the end of the show, patting Mandy's arm.

'You're a pal,' said Jean as they walked home. 'What was the film about, by the way? Mummy will want to know.'

But Jean did not forget Mandy. She did her best to provide her with male companionship too. She asked her home to dinner.

'Michael and Alan are coming over for the evening.' She giggled. 'Mummy and Daddy are going to the pictures after we finish tea.'

Mandy found Alan a somewhat stiff youth with crisp curly brown hair and fat freckled hands. He did not attract her in the remotest way and they found it difficult to talk to one another.

After her parents left, Jean with a wink turned out the light.

'The radio sounds nicer in the dark,' she said.

'Atta girl,' said Michael, catching her arms and pulling her down on the chair with him.

Mandy looked at Alan on the other chair and stiffened. She had no experience to guide her. He made a tentative move to take her hand, and she hastily began fiddling with the radio knobs.

'Awful programme,' she said.

'Was it?' he replied. 'I wasn't listening. Perhaps I can get something better,' He too, fiddled with the knobs.

'What do you do at home?' he asked.

'Homework as a rule,' said Mandy.

'You mean you still go to school. Holy cats!'

'A real swot,' she said tartly.

'Hey, you two,' called Michael's voice through Jean's hair. 'Why don't you get on with it? You aren't usually so slow, Alan.'

And Jean giggled delightedly – or was it reminiscently?

But Alan was apparently not on form that night. He took one look at the face of the puritan opposite and stayed where he was.

'I suppose you go to church on Sunday, too,' he said.

'Three times,' said Mandy.

'Gawd!' said Alan. 'How did I get into this?'

Next day Jean looked at Mandy shyly.

'Didn't you like Alan?' she asked.

'Very nice,' said Mandy politely.

'But you only talked all night.'

Mandy looked with amusement at the troubled face alongside her own.

'I guess I'm not that sort of a girl, Jeannie,' she said. 'I haven't your experience. Just a school-girl.'

'Yes,' said Jean confidently, 'it does make a difference when you leave school.'

But somehow Mandy couldn't imagine Nena leaving her alone in the dark with only two boys for company, not yet anyway. She began to realise that there were worlds about

which she knew nothing. And even though she felt uncertain about the freedom of her friends, she envied it.

'But he has such repulsive hands,' she rationalised and shuddered in retrospect at the thought of letting him kiss her. But what if the boy had been Michael, not Alan? Mandy realised with a shock that her reluctance would have been, at the most, transitory. For a second she glimpsed the passion in herself lapping at the shores of her asceticism.

And so the six months sped by. She had no sooner become accustomed to the heat, the trickle of perspiration that streaked down her back from nine a.m. to five p.m., to the blaze of the wood stove in the tin-roofed kitchen, and the wash-day steam rising hot and choking above the open copper set in the centre of the sun-stricken yard, than it was time to return home.

She parted from Catriona, Bob, Mary and Jim with real regret, but she also felt a thrill of gladness when her ship berthed at Erskine Street close on one a.m. and she saw the waiting upturned faces of Reg and Nena, Lyndon and Caroline.

'They won't come tonight,' said her friends on board. 'You may as well go to bed.'

But Mandy knew they were wrong. The Browns would come even if it were three a.m. tempestuous, self-centred, at times violent in their relationships, they would nevertheless be there. Mandy was not disappointed.

Mandy found school tiresome that year. Her own contemporaries had gone, they were now part of the grown-up world. Mandy would have liked to be part of that world too, but facts had to be faced. She settled down to study, concentrating on the Leaving Certificate at the end of the year. The trip had done her good, she was less turbulent, less over-touchy, even though she still seemed not quite well. The family had done its best. There appeared nothing really wrong. The cursory verdict of local M.D.s that her odd 'off' days were due to fatigue produced by general tension seemed the only sensible conclusion.

Somehow the year passed. In early September Nena took them to the pictures. Mandy enjoyed the film, Bette Davis in *Dark Victory*, an exciting play about a woman who knew she had only a limited time to live. Caroline and Mandy were just at the age when cloying heroism appealed. As they emerged into the half-dusk of five o'clock, Mandy still felt removed from the reality around her. It was almost in a dream that the thick black headlines on the news-stands flashed across her eyes. War.

Nena clutched her arm.

'Quick, Mandy, get a paper'

'This isn't true,' thought Mandy. 'In a moment the lights will go up and we'll be back in the warm theatre.' But as she watched the crowd surging up and down the Town Hall steps, eddying in waves around the newsboys, chatting uncharacteristically to one another, she knew that this trance-like atmosphere was reality.

'Good old Britain. She wouldn't let Poland down.'

'I told you Munich was only a stall. Now we're ready to call Hitler's bluff.'

Mandy watched in surprise a couple of boys scarcely older than herself throwing the paper in the air.

'We'll be there,' they shouted.

Some of the crowd began to cheer and lifted the lads up on their shoulders.

A wispy ragged little man clinging to the outskirts of the cheering mob muttered audibly.

'Bloody Imperialist war. They're all hoping to take a swipe at Russia, that's all.'

'Russia,' spat the man next to him. 'Who made the traitor's agreement with Hitler, that's what I'd like to know?'

Nena at this juncture seized their elbows and pushed them through the crowds into the Underground.

'Well,' she said quietly, 'it's on again.'

In the few weeks the first uniforms began to appear on the streets and Mandy found it harder than ever to give her mind to the impending examination. But the excitement died. They were at war, yet life seemed to go on just the same. The school routine was not affected and except for a slight increase in the number of khaki figures, the war became simply an extension of the peace.

Mandy settled down to work and the examination was soon over. There were six nerve-racking weeks to live through before the results were published, but they too passed and finally she knew she could do as she wanted.

'Sure you don't want to enrol in medicine or law?' asked Nena.

'I don't understand you,' said Lyndon. 'If I had the chance to do medicine I'd grab it.'

'No,' said Mandy, 'I want to do art.'

As she waited for the university term to begin Mandy, conscious of a new untried world stretching before her,

decided to make some definite confession of her religious faith, for she was now at the peak of her Christian fervour.

'There's a lot of godlessness in the university,' said the pastor gravely. 'You must keep up a Christian witness.'

'The poor Davidsons lost their son in that den of iniquity,' said the pastor's wife gloomily. 'He became a professor, but what's the use of learning without God?'

'You don't have to worry about me,' said Mandy with the confidence of youth. 'I feel like St Paul. You know, "Neither height nor depth nor any other creature".'

'Ah,' said the pastor's wife with gloomy satisfaction. 'Watch your step, Mandy. You haven't been exposed to temptation yet.'

Mandy felt a little impatient. She was not even sure if she and the pastor classed the same things as sin. Yet at this stage they were in essential agreement. It seemed to her that faith, not reason, was the clue to religion, that the Bible must be accepted in its entirety and she felt the moment had come to express that faith in an open declaration of belief. She asked to be baptised.

It was not quite as simple as that. She had to attend classes of instruction, to make sure she fully understood the implications of believer's baptism, classes that incorporated a subtle propaganda for the Baptist viewpoint. But Mandy, absorbed in her decision, found in them inspiration, a wealth of symbolism that she had previously missed.

'You see,' said the pastor reading through the lovely words of Romans 6; 'We are buried by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. The meaning is obvious. The act of baptism is a re-enactment of the burial and resurrection of Christ. Unless you believe in total immersion, the symbolism is null and void.'

Burial and resurrection of Christ. Mandy could hardly

wait for the moment. Yet she also dreaded it. What if I am not worthy to share this sacrament?

The same doubt assailed her as she slipped the white frock over her head, but once she stood upon the steps of the baptistry fear vanished. She looked down at her pastor standing in the water.

'Do you believe,' he asked looking up at her, 'that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, your Saviour?'

'I do,' she answered, clearly and with conviction

Taking his hand she stepped down beside him.

'At your own request and on your own confession of faith I hereby baptise . . .' but she barely heard the rest of the formula nor the responsive chant of the congregation. As the waters closed over her, she had her moment of exultation. For one second she shared with the mystic the sense of complete union with God.

Then it was over. As her helpers quickly changed her clothes, the mood of wonder lingered but tinged with an overtone of the ludicrous.

'I look like a drowned rat,' she thought, then prayed that such blasphemy would not assail her at the holiest moments.

She was now ready to start university, convinced that in God she had her eternal refuge and a faith that the assaults of learning would be unab! to shake.

The first few weeks were a whirl of unprecedented activity. The little alphabetical box in the hall of the Women's Union was crammed with invitations – requests from the various societies to join their ranks. There were talks on 'The Place of the University in Society' given by Greek Professors who had barely set foot outside their quarried stone fortress; 'The Present War, Crusade or Imperialist Propaganda?' sponsored by the Labour club, 'Present day Democracy, the role of America' under the auspices of the moderate history club, 'Free Love' expounded by the president of the Rationalist Society. There were also invitations to 'fresher's welcomes' from the Christian Union and the Evangelical Society. 'Join our study group, come to our prayer meeting.' 'Who wrote the Bible?' asked one Group. 'Read God's inspired word,' carolled the other. Having been warned by her conventional bodyguards in the home church against the heresies in the modernist theology, Mandy went for the time being with the Evangelists. She found them a mixed set, some intellectually capable, anxious to demolish all new theories from evolution to physics in favour of the Garden of Eden. This they did with great skill and sophistry and in a way utterly convincing to a first year prepared to accept the theory anyway.

Within this society, however, Mandy found a new human species with whom she had had no contact in the past. They came from the best schools in and out of Sydney, lovely homes set in luxurious gardens on either side of the harbour. The depression was a political gimmick created by the Labour party. Anyone prepared to do a fair day's work could always get a job. And they were intensely and deeply religious as

behaved followers of a God who was, without doubt, Conservative, British and above all Anglican. This belief was a revelation to Mandy, as she had been inclined to think that the Evangelical faith was the exclusive property of the nonconformist sects. In general they were thoroughly nice, thoroughly kind people, pure in word and deed but they would have been horrified at the thought of admitting the original Christ of Galilee to their exclusive social set. Anyone who followed the path of the Lord, as set out in the Bible, could undoubtedly afford exclusive school fees, so it was hardly worth bothering about anyone outside this group and it must be admitted the elect rarely included humble carpenters. If only the poor would give up their sin, then poverty would disappear. They could quote thousands of examples of men, previously drunken, who had been able to hold down jobs found for them by the church after their conversion.

'In short,' said Mandy when faced with one of these Christian spirits at a fresher's squash, 'you're prepared to find jobs for the redeemed, but why bother about the unemployed sinner?'

The young lady in question looked through Mandy as if she didn't exist.

'The spreading of God's word is surely the first task of the Christian,' she replied gently, 'not clothing the poor.'

Mandy felt her throat constrict with anger.

'Of course Jesus was only playing a joke on the rich young ruler,' she began then she felt a tug at her coat by a new friend Pat, one of the unrepentant heathens who had come along to a religious 'do' out of sheer curiosity.

'Skip it, Mandy,' she said. 'No use getting cranky. They wouldn't know what you were talking about anyway. The Labour Party's a dirty word. They never mention it.'

And even though Mandy enjoyed the talks on religion, and

the stimulating discussion of the intellectuals in the Evangelical ranks, she felt uneasily that Pat might be right. As sincere in her faith as any of them, she nevertheless began to feel that her real sympathies lay elsewhere.

Outside religion, Mandy found even more exciting companions. For the first time she discovered friends with her own academic tastes. For some reason her main school group had been scientists. She mixed now with people who argued happily about the merits of free verse or discussed the attitudes of Forster into the early hours of the morning, mingling them with arguments on the problems of reality and the chances of immortality. They discussed the war from all angles, a defence of freedom or an attempt to keep all power in the hands of a Capitalist Europe? There were supporters of both sides. And slowly the war which for most of them was the subject of a purely academic argument widened in extent as Hitler's tanks began the invasion of France. Yet their year contained for the time being the usual quota of men, the long arm of conscription being still a threat for the future. The girls were all knitting frantically or making camouflage netting, but as far as Mandy was concerned her experience of war was still impersonal. Then one day as she slipped into the tiered seats of the old history room one of her school acquaintances slipped her a note.

'Did you know John Peters was killed over Germany last month?'

Suddenly the room seemed cold. Two years ago she had debated against John Peters in an inter-high-school debate. He was no more than eighteen months older than herself. She remembered he had joined the Air Force as soon as war broke out. For a moment she saw again a short fair-haired boy with startling blue eyes and a dimple which he himself hated. He had been, above all, vital. Now the ancient lecture room seemed an anachronism thrown into a modern world

from a less troubled age. It was she, Mandy, who was stranded in some backwash of time, the real business of living and dying going on elsewhere.

In the churches, too, the war had wrought a change. Everywhere as Hitler began to advance across Europe the Union Jack and the Australian flag were draped across the altars. For a time Mandy accepted patriotism as normal, but her grandmother's reaction forced her to look at the issue from a fresh viewpoint.

'How dare they?' said the old lady, angry for the first time in Mandy's memory. 'Turning the church of God into a temple of nationalism.'

'But surely, Grandmother,' said Mandy, 'if we don't fight the bestiality of Nazism, there'll be, in time, no Christianity at all. Do you think God wants us to do nothing about the murdered Jews, the children in concentration camps? How could he possibly mind a fight in such a cause?'

Vicky looked straight at Mandy, no doubt in her now faded blue eyes.

'God always minds,' she said clearly. 'You can't defend goodness by war. Christ told us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemy.'

'Even if it involves the destruction of all we believe in?' queried Lyndon.

'Even if it involves all that,' said Vicky. 'After all, who are we to judge the ways of God? Our destruction may be part of his ultimate purpose. We certainly don't support God by disobeying him. If we all refused to fight—'

'But that's the point,' said Mandy impatiently. 'Such universals never occur. There is always someone who fights. Pacifism is not enough. It simply hands the world over to the aggressors.'

'Personally I can't see that your wars have achieved anything to the contrary,' said her Grandmother dryly, 'after

endless centuries of them you are still fighting aggression. If you believe pacifism is not enough, then you believe Christianity is not enough.'

'Perhaps it isn't,' said Mandy and was immediately shocked at her own betrayal of herself.

She lay awake at night trying to reconcile the beliefs of her fathers with her own innate conviction that pacifism was not the answer to either German vandalism or Japanese imperialism. Yet her grandmother convinced her sufficiently to make her writhe at the lip service paid to the war machine by the Christian churches Sunday after Sunday. She tried talking it over with the pastor, but his arguments did not seem to her to answer her grandmother. Like herself he believed in the war because there seemed to him no other solution and he did not really bother to analyse its relationship to the teaching of Christ. So Mandy too shelved the problem, but an uneasy sensation of dissatisfaction remained to cloud her subconscious. She was also too busy to wrestle with the question indefinitely. She not only had her lectures to worry about but the family finances as well.

'Here you are,' said Nena, handing over the little worn purse at the beginning of February. 'I've struggled with this for eight years. You'll have more spare time than I have.'

Caroline was in turn studying for her leaving, Lyndon worked from nine to five; there was no escape. So the management of the money plus the preparation of the evening meal devolved on her shoulders and the stresses and tension of her life increased accordingly. It was nerve-racking and wearing trying to run a house at seventeen with no authority to back her decisions, knowing that Nena would always back Lyndon and Lyndon do her best to prevent any undue troubles falling on the shoulders of Caroline. If she economised on meat she met the opposition of Reg. Even though the grocer's bill rose with every month of war the

family expected to live as usual. Somehow they had to be paid without any fortuitous dipping into her own slender purse, for any encroachment in that direction would have meant failure on her part to clothe herself or deal with medical expenses. If she made suggestions for changes Lyndon flouted her. Still it was not an impossible price to pay for day lectures even if she seemed only half well most of the time. By the end of first term she was already immersed in work, essays, reading lists, logic exercises, making the hours of study much longer than they appeared on paper. The vacation was welcome. The Evangelical group was running a house-party on the secluded reaches of the Hawkesbury. Mandy decided to go. She went down with the first party in the early afternoon. She was glad to find they included the people she liked best, the intellectual section rather than the wealthy elect. Even if they did not share her political views, they did not regard all poverty as the just visitation of God upon the wicked.

As the little launch churned its way with a subdued chug through the water she glanced at her companions. Betty, a gawky clever girl from the same school as herself, she knew and liked. As a senior she had treated first years as individuals with sensible views of their own. Margaret, a young matron plus baby, was acting as official housemother to give the excursion the correct aura of respectability. Then there was John, a super-intense, religious medical student who preached the gospel even in the labour ward and Peter, the society's answer to the modernists, who could prove every word in the Bible utterly reliable with the doubtful argument that the verification of spatio-temporal events vouched for the truth of the metaphysical ones. They accepted her happily as one of the saved and if the tiny cracks in her integrity created by the unsolved problem of the rich young ruler and the beloved enemy were already in the wall of her devotion,

neither they nor even Mandy were consciously aware of them.

As well as the familiar group, there were two strange faces. One, a gaunt young man, broad in head and body, with a naïve, boyish expression, was introduced as Harry, a missionary on furlough from India. The other stranger had by far the most interesting face in the company. She was not more than twenty-one or -two with straight fair hair pulled sharply back from cheekbones that curved into eyes tawny yellow in colour and secret in their bottomless depths. Her face alone would have caught Mandy's attention, but her interest was fanned by a pair of delicate hands, the fingernails of which were painted a bright blue. Mandy felt the corners of her companions' eyes slant surreptitiously down to the druidical fingers resting lightly on the edge of the boat. The Evangelical Society barely used lipstick. It certainly shuddered away from red nail polish. Even pink savoured of the courts of Jezebel. Mandy felt a surge of relief followed by a wave of guilt. The final member was quite obviously 'unsaved'. Here, she thought, was a chance for conversation beyond the clichés of her present society. Betty introduced her as Mary Anderson, a new graduate from New Zealand, now employed by the history department. Mandy following the fluctuating lines of the shore soon became lost in her own thoughts. She was awakened by Harry's voice, replying apparently to a question of Mary's.

'The point is the Indians can't get along without the British and in their heart of hearts they know it. Men like Ghandi aren't Christian, after all, and without the Christians where would India be?'

'Where indeed?' murmured Mary; 'sunk no doubt in the depravity of her great Hindu past.'

'Exactly,' said Harry. 'She owes all her progress to Britain.'

'With which, of course,' smiled Mary, 'the term Christian is synonymous.'

'Well,' said Harry smiling at her with condescension, 'one has to be fair. I wouldn't go so far as to say there would be no Christianity without the British, but it would be nearer the truth than you might think. Believe me, I've seen the country.'

'How fortunate,' said Mary. 'How lucky for God that London replaced Rome and Clive defeated Dupleix.'

John looked at Mary with hostility, resenting the undertone of mockery, but Harry, totally unsubtle, beamed with pleasure at her interest, Mandy hugged her knees with delight, sensing the prospect of a real argument, but Peter intervened, his long lean face thrust consciously into the pose suggestive of the rational Christian. If he had smoked he would have produced a pipe.

'You mustn't take Harry as representing the intellectual view of Christianity, Mary. He's a field worker, not a theologian.'

'I see,' smiled Mary, 'just a missionary. You know, Harry, I suspect he's being quite unkind to you.'

Peter glared and John turned his back. Betty hastily changed the subject.

The topic for the conference was 'Christianity. Am I giving a satisfactory witness?' Talks, discussions, prayers were mingled with the natural delights of bathing, boating, fishing, walking. Mandy quite enjoyed the lazy afternoon lying in the sun beside the shore, tickling the toes of Margaret's baby, while they searched the Acts for the perfect apostle and the texts that exhorted them to preach the Pauline version of salvation. After tea, burnt chops and tomatoes, cooked over the wood fire with much giggling and fun by Betty and Mandy who had been rostered for the evening meal, they set up the canvas stretchers and made the beds. As they were all tired they turned in and went to sleep immediately.

Mandy was awakened by a slow drip of dew that plonked

gently on her middle, having oozed its way through the galvanised iron roof. She realised she was bitterly cold, the night air of May attacking her from floor level through the unmattressed canvas. She was also thirsty. She slipped out of bed, thrust her dressing gown over her pyjamas and padded barefooted into the kitchen. She found a cup in the darkness lit by the flickering light of the dying wood-stove and crept out to the vine-covered porch at the back where the tank tap intruded its head through the wire netting. As she bent above the bucket, watching the water trickle into the china, concentrating so that she could cut off the flow without waste of the liquid as precious as gold in that drought-stricken year, she was startled by a footstep on the flagging behind her. Instinctively she swung round to meet the intruder face to face.

'Hullo,' said a pleasant male voice, 'I'm sorry I startled you. I've only just arrived, by car.'

Mandy realised with relief he was one of the house-party and recovered her wits sufficiently to take in a somewhat stocky figure.

'That's all right,' she said hastily. 'I'm sorry I jumped. I didn't know anyone else was coming. I guess we'd better go inside.'

'I guess so,' said the boy. 'Say, I don't suppose you know where the food is kept, I'm frightfully hungry.'

Mandy laughed, Fumbling across the kitchen she managed to find the matches and lamp. Lighting the wick she turned it low so as not to wake the others. The kitchen was suffused with a hazy yellow light.

'Sit down,' she said, 'and I'll see what I can rustle up.'

Above the breadboard she looked at her companion with interest. Her impression of stockiness had been correct, but the light revealed what she had not previously noted, the intense fairness of his face and hair. If the brows and lashes

framing the pale blue eyes had not been slightly darker in outline, he would have passed as an albino.

He in his turn looked with approval at Mandy. In the lamplight, with her dark hair ruffled by sleep, the shadows accentuating the darkness of her eyes, she looked absurdly youthful. Her bare toes jutting out beneath the hems of the pyjamas increased the schoolgirl impression. She was, he thought, very young. He liked the sensitivity in the dark eyes, the air of innocence in her child face.

'Hullo, fresher,' he laughed. 'I guess we haven't met officially. I'm Keith Dane, fourth-year engineering.'

'Oh,' said Mandy, 'one of the manual faculties.'

'That's hardly complimentary,' he said, biting into the bread and butter that she placed in front of him, 'and I said hullo so nicely too.'

'Well,' said Mandy, 'you called me a fresher.'

'I see,' he answered gravely. 'I apologize.'

'How come we've never met?' said Mandy. 'I've been to all the meetings this year.'

'I'm afraid that's my fault,' he responded. 'This is my final year and I've been working flat out. I decided to come down here only at the last moment.'

'Which is why you're so late.'

'Which is why I'm so late. It's been worth it.'

He smiled at her.

'If I'd come on time I'd have eaten with the herd. Coming at midnight, I receive a meal all to myself and make a new friend.'

Mandy felt warm inside. It apparently did not matter to this boy that she was only a fresher. She had noticed that John and Peter barely listened to her when she took part in a discussion, treating her as a no-account newcomer. For the first time, she felt really welcome. When she awoke the next morning she wondered at the inexplicable feeling of

delight that fluttered across her waking moment, for, like Reg, she was not as a rule a happy waker, then she remembered the late supper. She sprang out of bed with a song, secular not religious, and raced for the shower concealed well up the yard behind a web of hessian.

Yet Keith was like all the others, intensely religious, evangelical in outlook. In fact he seemed even more ready than they to take his faith at face value, for it was obvious in the group meeting that theoretic issues barely interested him. He could not present an argument like Peter, nor make an appeal with the fervour of John. He refused to argue with Mary, he discussed only the technical aspects of Indian civilisation with Harry. But on the personal side he followed the dictates of his creed with an unswerving fanaticism. Why then did she prefer him to the rest? It was in part the subjective character of his religion. She felt here a link with herself even though she could not accept every Pauline command with the unquestioning faith that he did. The friendship begun the first evening continued. In the boat she usually found him beside her, disentangling her fishing lines, baiting her hooks. On hikes, while he never suggested they pair off alone, he usually walked in line next to her, pointing out the flowers she didn't know, naming the bays and headlands. He was friendly even if impersonal. He seemed to her more tolerant of others, less self-conscious than her other friends. She was surprised to find Mary thought otherwise.

It was a lovely morning, with a touch of warmth retrospective of summer and whiff of chill prophetic of winter. The sun was just rising and finding Mary also awake counting the dewdrops on the wire-netting for want of something better to do, Mandy suggested a walk. They did not go far. Having climbed the red-brown road behind the house they sat on a rock at the peak of the hill and watched the

new sun spread across the hills and water of the Hawkesbury.

'Perfect,' said Mary. 'Normally I hunger for New Zealand but at a moment like this I am glad to be just here.'

'That's Hawkesbury country,' said Mandy. 'It gets you in. Basically it's my own country. I spent the first ten years of my life on its suburban fringe. I feel that wherever I end up, one bit of me will always belong here.'

'The first ten years,' said Mary; 'I don't think we ever escape from them.'

Mandy said nothing. She saw through the curving river, the garden at Fernleigh, the spacious house, the half-remembered face of Ann.

'You're silent,' said Mary. 'You know, Mandy, you don't fit here. How did you come to be mixed up with this lot?'

Mandy dug her fist against the rock.

'You mistake me, Mary, I'm here because I believe – like they do.'

'No, you don't,' said Mary. 'You deceive yourself. They're either fanatics or utterly banal. You are neither.'

'You're wrong there,' said Mandy. 'They're nice people. They simply have the courage of their convictions.'

'Yes,' said Mary, 'nice people who believe that no one else in the world has ever been right or ever will be.'

Mandy crumpled a fallen gum leaf and felt the relieving scent of eucalyptus strike her nostril.

'If you're going to believe,' she said simply, 'you've got to believe absolutely, otherwise the edifice crumbles.'

'I agree,' said Mary, 'but surely an intelligent person ought to explore the cracks. You people don't. You rationalise.'

'Hardly fair,' said Mandy. 'They're always exploring the cracks. This very conference they've discussed free thinking, evolution, Bible research.'

'Do you think so?' said Mary. 'You mean they've discussed

other theories beginning with the assumption that they must be wrong. You don't really look at a view critically until you consider at least the possibility of its being true.'

Mandy was silent. She remembered how the parson at home had refused even to consider the possibility that Christ had preached pacifism.

'And they're such busybodies.'

'Oh, why?'

'Do you know, Mandy, that you and Keith are the only two who haven't pressed me into a corner with no door for escape and asked me am I saved?'

Mandy smiled. 'I'm afraid, Mary, they're probably more concerned for your eternal welfare than I am. You're not really complimenting me, you know. You've just pointed out what a rotten Christian I am. I'm a lousy evangelist. It's my self-pride, the coddling of my own self-consciousness that prevents me.'

'Then for God's sake, Mandy, stay that way. At least your self-consciousness, as you call it, arises partly from an innate respect for the personal feelings of others.'

Mandy fumbled with the leaves.

'I offer no brief for myself, Mary. My reticence is simply cowardice. But what about Keith? He hasn't bothered you, after all.'

Mary looked sharply at Mandy.

'Keith?'

'Yes, Keith,' said Mandy. 'Why doesn't he convert you?'

'Keith's a monk,' said Mary. 'He has a purity bug. An unsatisfactory man. The aim of his life is to subdue the flesh, control his own passion. Christianity provides him with a formula for doing it. He'll expect his wife to be a snow-white virgin. He mistakes youth for innocence.'

'And is purity such a bad thing?' asked Mandy stiffly.

'No,' said Mary, 'but even his own religion could teach

him that it only exists in spasms. Keith is a normal passionate human being trying to kid himself. He can't keep his eyes off a pretty girl, but he takes care not to touch them. I bet, Mandy, he hasn't even taken your hand and you attract him immensely.'

'I wouldn't want him to take my hand. Why should he?'

Mandy felt the tears rise at the back of her eyes. It was not Mary's business.

'Because, my dear, as I said you attract him. He finds you fresh, innocent. He's always hanging around you, but on your own showing never steps an inch out of line. He might as well be your brother.'

'You just don't understand the Christian viewpoint,' said Mandy.

'Maybe,' said Mary. 'I never did like Paul. I find him a perversion of Christ. And I don't believe you're that sort of Christian either. You have too much potential passion, Mandy. At the moment you're merely young. Don't fall in love with Keith. He'd always disappoint you.'

'Don't be silly,' said Mandy angrily. 'We're friends. Nothing more. I like him. He likes me. You admit yourself he is tolerant.'

'No, not tolerant. Not concerned, that's all. My soul doesn't worry him. He senses that I am neither innocent nor virginal. I might even seduce him. He avoids me like the plague.'

'Well, you can't have it both ways,' said Mandy. 'You condemn the others for bothering you and you condemn Keith for leaving you alone. You can't condemn both.'

'Well, I do,' said Mary, 'the whole lot of them. They've never lived. They talk out of books. The man I love, Mandy, is at present behind wire in Australia, an interned German. He left Germany to escape Hitler but he's not an Australian citizen so they shut him up here too. What does petty sin matter to people like Kurt caught between two warring

ideologies? Do these people really believe that they can solve the world's economic problems by deciding to be Christians? There are Christians in Germany, too. You now count Russia amongst your allies and she has renounced the Christian faith. The British enslaved Africa in the name of Christianity, the very sort preached by your friends down there. On whose side is God, Mandy? Tell me that. What price your Keith's virtue if Kurt were to die tomorrow? If he were free I'd live with him and love him. Even if we never married we'd have created something beautiful beyond the shallow version of love dished up here. What do men like John know of the suffering of Christ? A comfortable home, a good school, a protective mama ready to help him financially over every difficulty. How are people like Harry going to cure the ills of India with a few so-called Christian platitudes? Do you really think morality is as simple as all that, Mandy?

'No,' said Mandy, 'I don't. But I don't think anyone knows what someone else has suffered. All crucifixions aren't on a public cross. Who knows what happens in an ordinary suburban villa? What do we really know about John? Perhaps his father drank; perhaps in the privacy of their four walls he bullies his mother, perhaps John is seeking a refuge away from his mother's over-protection. How do you know?'

'Because if that were so, he wouldn't be nearly so self-satisfied,' she answered. 'He wouldn't boast about worrying women in labour with questions of salvation. He'd be too busy helping them through the process of birth. Your picture fits you, Mandy, much better than it fits John or Peter, or Betty or Keith. These people are Victorian Christians trained into a rigid code by good home precept. Their humanity is nil, well - almost. It has never dawned on them that their Christ exhorted them to love their immoral neighbour, not just convert him.'

Mandy was silent. She believed. Mary did not. She still felt that purity of self mattered. There had to be faith and standards. Nevertheless Mary's final words struck a chord in her own subconscious. The problem of hate, the problem of poverty. The unanswered conflict between her own asceticism and humanitarianism. Could one purchase personal salvation and forget the sufferings of a world? She clutched at God as she had clutched at Ann. There must be a settled answer. She saw the sun, full risen, strike the opposite hills, illumine the water.

'Oh, God,' she prayed, 'don't you die too.'

God didn't die for Mandy, not that year anyway. She saw too much of Keith and liked him far too well to desert her Evangelical friends or her convictions. They made a 'thing' out of their faith, personal, subjective, almost mystical. Their mission, combined with Keith's interest in herself, made her feel wanted, compensated for Reg's lapses, Lyndon's pre-occupation with Caroline, Nena's devotion to Lyndon. She enjoyed the human fellowship of the Christian community, the house-parties, squashes, the picnics. The dusty soot of the steam-trains climbing the mountain grades grimed their faces while their young voices beat out the Christian choruses to the rhythm of John's piano accordion and Peter's improvised batons.

'I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart.'

'Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.'

'Wide, wide as the ocean, Is my Saviour's love.'

They went into town to meet the visiting Evangelists and attended the private meetings of prayer led by archbishops or their equivalents to speed the visitors on their soul-saving ways. Sometimes they gathered on street corners and sang or appealed to the passing crowds by giving testimonies of God's redeeming power to renovate their own inexperienced young lives. 'Salvation for all if you only believed. Jesus said, "I am the way," "though your sins be as scarlet as crimson," and there is no good in us.'

It was true that for the first six months she rarely saw Keith alone. Their friendship flowered within the religious context, but Mandy began to look forward to the smile of welcome, the little aside, 'you'll be there, won't you?'

Apart, they wrote to one another in the style of the Epistles. When Mandy first received a missive in the Biblical vein she was puzzled, then angry. It read:

My dearest Mandy and fellow-worker in Christ,

I, the servant of Jesus, wish you joy in the Gospel from the first day until now.

In the words of the apostle, I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, being filled at the memory with the fruits of goodness which are rendered to the glory and praise of God.

According to my earnest expectation and hope in God, we shall gather together in a praise service to greet our friend and missionary of Christ, the Rev. Wheeler, in the temple of our Lord at the back of Kent Street.

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Mandy, my dear, even unto the end of the world.

Your brother in Christ,
Keith.

It seemed to her pretentious, even blasphemous. It embarrassed her just as their insensitivity to the problems of the worker embarrassed her in front of her political friends. When she next met Keith she accused him of posing, only to be met by a look of blank astonishment.

'But Mandy, why not? Surely there's no harm in trying to keep the spirit of the Bible alive in the modern world. Surely two Christians can write to one another confessing the consciousness of their faith without being embarrassed by it. Would you prefer the sickly phrases of temporal love?'

In the face of his sincerity Mandy was silent but mentally she rebelled. Across her mind flowed the lovely lines of temporal love with which she was familiar. Carew's beautiful,

'Ask me no more where Jove bestows', and the felicitous indelicacies of Sedley.

'Don't be so narrow,' she thought and yet, perhaps, that was her fault too. Perhaps some inherent, even if suppressed, streak of poetry struggled for expression in Keith's desire to recapture the living expression of faith that was Paul's great work. And so she acquiesced, becoming in time a more expert adaptor of the Biblical form than he was, even if the sanctity of her epistles was marred by the flashes of humour that had an irresponsible habit of creeping into her efforts. In another respect she soon discovered that Mary had been right. Keith's monomania was purity: a clean body and a clean mind were his favourite themes in study circles. Even a kiss given in passion could detract from the holiness of Christian marriage. Mandy admired his sincerity, his obvious belief in his own ideals and if it had not been for Mary's comments she would not have noticed that his eyes had a habit of following the neatest ankle in a room. But Mary did exist and Mary's cynicism was not without effect. Mandy found that his obvious delight in the female form irritated her, a reproach to her own refusal to credit Mary's contention. One day while eating in the park before the usual lunch hour prayer meeting her annoyance found expression.

'Do you really believe what you say, Keith? All these months I've tried to understand you, but every time a pretty girl passes, you react just like any other young man.'

To Mandy's horror he blushed.

'I hoped no one knew,' he muttered. 'Oh Mandy, why do they tempt me? Why do I go home and dream about them, things I could never mention to a girl like you?'

Mandy, moved by his distress, drew his head into her lap and ruffled the fair, fair hair. To her surprise, he did not draw away.

'It's nothing Keith, truly,' she said. 'It just proves you're

normal. I remember how horrid I felt when I began to visualise my school-teachers in the nude.'

'Don't, Mandy,' he begged. 'Don't lower yourself to comfort me. I don't believe you have thoughts like mine. You're too young, too innocent.'

He buried his face in her skirt.

'Sometimes I even doubt my own faith; in the middle of the night when I cannot control the nightmares of sex I find myself asking what is Christ if he can't stop me thinking like this. And I do pray about it, Mandy. Why doesn't He help me?'

'He will,' said Mandy gently.

With her lips she brushed the top of his head. To her surprise he suddenly pulled her to him, kissed her hair, her eyes, her hands, her lips. Her own blood stirred and she prepared to respond. Then just as suddenly he pushed her away.

'Forgive me,' he said, 'forgive me. I did not mean to violate your sympathy in this way.'

After that she did not see him again for some time. He was busy with examinations, but she sensed as well that he did not wish to meet her. Knowing it would embarrass him she did not write. She wanted to tell him that he had not offended her, but she feared that he did not wish to refer to the incident at all.

To her relief a couple of months later he asked her out, to dine with him, alone. She was glad to find that he appeared to be his normal self again.

'Well, Mandy,' he said, 'tonight we celebrate. Let's order the best.'

'Why?' she asked.

'Don't you realise you're dining with a fully-fledged engineer. You're the first to know, outside Mum and Dad, of course.'

She was flattered, yet somehow impatient with him.

'Congratulations,' she said. 'I'm honoured at the confidence. I rather thought you had forgotten my existence.'

'Never,' he answered. 'I just felt I had no right to impose on you after - well - you know.'

'Don't be silly, Keith,' she said impatiently, 'I didn't mind. I -'

But he wouldn't let her finish.

'I knew that I'd let you down,' he added. 'I feared that I had spoilt for all time the wonderful spirituality of our relationship. I've spent the last couple of months wrestling with myself. You were right to challenge me, Mandy. I was playing with temptation. But it won't happen again. I'm cured now. I bet I haven't looked at another girl all this evening. We can go on being friends, can't we, Mandy?' 'That's what I wanted to ask you. When you said you'd come tonight, I really didn't know if I was coming or going, I was so pleased.'

She nearly said, 'Damn the spirituality. I wasn't condemning your sensuality, merely the consistency of your views.' She even felt angry at his stupidity, his failure to understand human emotion, but her anger was softened by her intuition of his own sincerity and obvious insecurity. He simply did not trust himself in an intimate situation. She wondered why. She had moreover missed his companionship, the feeling of being needed that he created in her. Perhaps as they knew one another a little better

'I'm glad you asked me,' she said.

He smiled at her with pleasure, then began to crumble the bread left on his plate.

'There's something else you want to say, isn't there, Keith?'

'You even read my thoughts, Mandy,' he laughed. 'As a matter of fact there is. I'm joining the Air Force. There's no

reason for me to stay out any longer. I knew one part of me was shirking it. Most of the chaps aren't Christians, I know, but that's really a reason for joining in, not staying out. I just don't like being laughed at, that's all. But if I knew you were back here, Mandy, praying for me and waiting, then I don't think I'd mind being different.'

And Mandy felt pity, pity for his inadequacy, for his self-consciousness, so she committed herself too far. She gave him the assurance he wanted.

'I'll wait for you, Keith,' she said against her own better instincts, 'always, if you need me.'

'Thank you, Mandy,' he said. For a second he touched her hand, then turned with relief away from the personal.

'There's a service at Central Baptist to-night,' he said. 'For servicemen. Like to come along?'

'I'd prefer a show,' she thought. 'It would relieve the tension.' But she knew Keith was doubtful about the correctness of attending theatres and she had committed herself to his ways and thoughts.

'I'd love to,' she answered.

And yet at the same time as she became absorbed in the strictest religious groups, the more secular aspects of university life began to attract her. Contrary to general Evangelical policy that regarded such activities as misguided Christian Union beliefs, she joined the settlement group that laboured to produce clubs and activities for the children of Redfern. She also joined up with the Left-wing political societies even though she nearly came to blows with her friends over Finland. Mandy's sympathies lay with Labour, but her political studies led her to doubt the ultimate validity of the Marxist thesis even though it was the current pet baby of Left-wing intellectuals.

'O.K., Mandy,' said Pat, 'you'll see. The Finns are nothing but traitors.'

Mandy screwed up a pellet of bread and hit the newly painted pillar of the dining room.

'Sorry, Pat, I can't call aggression one thing when carried out by Hitler and something else when perpetrated by Russia.'

'You forget she's religious, Pat. Never trust a religious Socialist,' said one of Pat's friends: a girl called Ann.

'It's not a matter of religion,' said Mandy, 'it's a matter of principle.'

'Look here, my girl,' said Pat, 'When you're fighting the Capitalists there are no principles.'

'There are always principles,' said Mandy, 'whether you like them or not.'

She had her triumph at Pat's dismay when Russia entered the war. Pat was prepared to change her front in the battle against Fascism just as Mandy was willing to admit Russo-Finnish policy may have had a defensive objective after all. But the lengths to which her former comrades in Sydney were prepared to go shocked Pat. Mandy met her in the Quad one afternoon. She had just returned from a visit to down-town party headquarters.

'They can't mean it, Mandy,' she said. 'They can't.'

'What's wrong?' said Mandy.

'The party,' gasped Pat. 'They've put up a big portrait of Churchill right opposite the one of Stalin.'

Mandy rocked with laughter.

'I'll be expecting the V for victory sign from you, my girl, in the next day or so. That's one good thing about being Labour rather than Communist. I can refuse to give it.'

Pat laughed.

'You'd be a dead duck in any revolution, Mandy, my girl.'

That year Lyndon came up to University. She had won a scholarship for a therapy course and was prepared to hattle on a meagre allowance for two years to achieve her goal.

'They're going to need people when this war ends, Mandy. I want to be in it.'

Mandy smiled fondly at her. Good old Lyndon. Always true to her humanitarian faith.

'Sometimes I envy you,' said Mandy. 'Your purposes are so clear.'

'Why don't you leave those old Evangelicans and join the Christians with me. You're interested in social theory and quite a lot of them share our political views. You'd like the Biblical research, too. Everything can be explained by reason if you abandon the literal approach.'

'That's what I fear,' retorted Mandy sadly. 'Too much reason and there's no need for God. Social purpose instead of divine precept. Go that far and you may as well give up the theological aspect altogether.'

'Oh, you make me sick,' said Lyndon; 'a nasty, moralistic, narrow God, fed on the pieties of a Keith Dane.'

Yet if social Christianity had no power to win her, Mandy was finding more and more contacts within the group that had rejected God completely. Philosophy lectures brought her up against the free-thinkers, the advocates of all types of freedom from free love to free drink. They were in general a scruffy lot, badly dressed on principle, anti the war on principle, anti labour on recent principle but with a few qualms here. They were, however, talkative and interesting. One boy in particular intrigued Mandy. He was slight, rather tubercular in build with wispy, uncut fair hair and a straggling untrimmed somewhat reluctant beard. He had, however forceful blue eyes and a gift of the gab. She got to know him as the editor of a student paper to whom she handed in the weekly Evangelical advertisement. His name was Derek Lancing. Whenever he met her he gently mocked her faith, endeavouring to make some utterance to shock her. She learnt to take his mockery in good part and, coming from

a family who could mind their own business to the extent of letting other people's letters rot in their box, was amused by his efforts to repel her. He in return was intrigued by his failure to produce any reaction beyond an ironic smile. When she went to a Rationalist meeting he began to move over for her, offering a cigarette as she settled back in her chair for the sheer joy of watching her refuse it.

'How's my little Evangelical friend today?' he would say. 'Entering the tents of the wicked? Tut, tut!'

'No,' replied Mandy, 'I'd rather be a door-keeper in the house of the Lord. Just here to watch the circus. It always reminds me of our testimony meetings, only in this case the Saviour is different.'

The eyes twinkled back at her.

'You may have something there,' he said.

After six months' intermittent acquaintance he challenged her.

'You don't really believe all that rubbish,' he asked.

'What rubbish?' said Mandy.

'You know very well what I mean -- the sort of frigid piety spewed around this place by Keith Dane.'

'Leave Keith out of it,' said Mandy.

'All right, my pet, if it offends your sensibilities. But surely your studies have some effect on you. Immortality, for instance. You calmly copy down the Prof's lectures on the Phaedo, dish them up at the exam, and still believe you're going to live forever.'

Mandy laughed.

'You don't really think people believe in eternity for the reasons given in the Phaedo, do you? Approximation or participation. Bunkum. One believes because one feels the eternity of God without questioning how it works.'

'Simple wish-fulfilment eh? Don't you think as a budding academic you ought to ask a few questions, Mandy?'

Mandy looked at him with sudden honesty.

'Yes,' she said, 'I'm beginning to think I ought. But what's the alternative? Blind believers in God on one side clutching the Bible as their eternal criterion of faith and, on the other, a bunch of equally conceited free-thinkers, clutching Joyce's *Ulysses* and a packet of the Prof's lectures as their guarantee that they can't possibly be wrong.'

'At least we live,' said Lancing.

'So do they,' said Mandy. 'They just live differently, that's all. You haven't convinced me yet that your way of life is better.'

'Come and have a cup of coffee with me, and I'll start immediately,' he challenged.

She felt the blue eyes flicker over her, not bothering to conceal the desire in their depths and she felt an excitement curl over her body in response.

It was a curious afternoon. Taking her hand he led her through the mazes of Sydney's back streets. They drank coffee and argued politics in a brown corner shop somewhere at the back of Crown Street. Fly-droppings speckled the sample packets of Bushell's tea ranged along the inside of a dirty window. The proprietor was ancient and like his shop not very clean. His origin was definitely not Anglo-Saxon. But the coffee was good.

Across the red-checked table-cloth she smiled at Derek.

'This is fun,' she said.

'Glad to please you, my pet, just a little haunt of my own.'

'How did you find it?' she asked.

'The city is mine. I know its nastiest ins and outs. In short, my love, I live in it.'

'But not of it,' said Mandy quickly.

He looked at her sharply.

'You mean that, unlike you, I don't devote myself to alleviating the suffering produced by poverty. Why should

I? Where the poor nauseate me, I ignore them. Where they don't, I enjoy them. Why interfere?"

Mandy knew it was a hit at her settlement interests and it amused her to note that like her Evangelical friends, he took the comfortable line of non-intervention. But she herself had not been thinking of social service.

'You misunderstand me,' she returned. 'I mean you have taken up the city, you dabble in its unsavoury aspects with adolescent glee, you have a natural feeling for its nice, quaint, vaguely Bohemian eating-places but I'm willing to bet you were raised exclusively in a neat, well-laundered middle-class suburb. Off-hand I'd say Lindfield.'

She saw that she had at last succeeded in disturbing him.

'Is it so obvious?' he asked.

It was the first time she had ever penetrated his guard and it delighted her to prick ever so slightly his air of easy superiority. But, being kind, she hastened to reassure him.

'Not really,' she said. 'I just have the advantage of you, that's all. You see I lived six years in an industrial suburb within four miles of the heart of the city. I've noticed that Evangelicals and free-thinkers have as a rule well-shod homes. My intellectual friends from industrial areas are either social Christians or Communists.'

'I see,' he answered. 'Perhaps then I ought to thank God for my deliverance. Shall we move on?'

Apparently desirous of proving that he did in fact know his city, they continued to walk up streets that she had never seen, streets that twisted behind factories and warehouses, filled with tiny shops and cramped dwelling-places wedged in every possible aperture. They picked out books in a little second-hand shop suspended between two terraces of old brick houses, somewhere below Oxford Street.

The owner, grey-haired, bespectacled and shrewd, greeted her companion with delight.

'Something you'll like, Mr Lancing,' he said. 'Real cheap, too.'

And he pressed into his hands a copy of Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* Derek and seller wrangled happily over the price for five minutes, apparently oblivious of her presence, but, once outside the shop, he pressed the copy into her hands.

'For you, my dear. Not *Ulysses*, of course, but it might do you good nevertheless. I have my own copy already.'

Mandy gave him an ironic smile.

'Thank you,' she said.

They had tea at King's Cross, in a tiny shop looking out on the trees of Macleay Street. It was cleaner and prettier than its Surry Hills equivalent but inferior in quality. The food, however, was improved by a discussion on philosophy and Mandy again found that she was enjoying herself thoroughly. It was only when she turned down the wine that he ordered that the façade of their relationship threatened to crack.

Derek drank a couple of glasses watching her thoughtfully, the mocking light now uppermost in his eyes.

'You didn't warn me that you had signed the pledge,' he said.

'You asked me out to coffee, so there was no need,' riposted Mandy.

'Very funny,' he answered, 'but I'm inviting you to drink something a little stronger now. Or are you afraid I'll make you drunk?'

Mandy's honesty came to her aid.

'In part,' she said. 'I also believe it's an evil.'

'But such a delightful one,' he smiled. 'A cure for all ills.'

'No,' said Mandy sharply, 'an escape from all reality.'

'Well, well. And who taught you that, my pet? I thought you and Mr Dane escaped from reality in other ways.'

Mandy felt the familiar tremble of anger in her body but

with an effort she controlled it, grasping the edge of the table tightly.

'My father,' she answered. 'He is an expert on all escape-techniques.'

For a moment he said nothing. Suddenly he was serious. Bending across the table he unclenched her hand and took it in his, straightening the fingers one by one.

'So that's it,' he said softly. 'Mandy, my pet, don't let your father rob you of the joy of living. You want to be safe, don't you, darling, and the Evangelicals are so, so safe. Why don't you forget them and your father?'

Her anger evaporated at the genuine gentleness in his voice. She looked at him with real liking and yet some amusement.

'It's not nearly as simple as all that,' she replied. 'I hate to disappoint your Freudian preconceptions but in many respects my father is the least of my problems. I learnt to accept him long ago and if you'd like to know he possesses the most wonderful joy of living I have ever known. When he chooses he can make life sing. What you don't see is that people like me don't want a universe dedicated only to joy. You speak as though material enjoyment was the one purpose in life. I want a little more than that. I want to participate in human suffering too and unlike you I have no need to run away from stuffy respectability. It's the one thing the Browns never had.'

She saw that she had now annoyed him.

'Forgive me,' he said. 'I didn't realise I had a bloody would-be Christ on my hands. The joys of crucifixion. Well, my dear, I disagree. I propose to get as much fun as I can out of my short life without looking for crosses to bear.'

'It seems to me you are bearing quite a number of crosses already,' Mandy said as meekly as she could.

'So you implied already. Very well, I shall down my crosses, including my respectability, as you call it, with the whole

damn bottle and perhaps another, seeing you're too proud to join me.'

By the end of the meal he was obviously a little drunk. Mandy felt a tremor of apprehension.

'I think I'd better go,' she said.

'Oh no,' he answered grasping her wrist. 'Not yet. You haven't heard my records. It would be ungallant of you not to see me home.'

Mandy resisted the impulse to reply that it was usual for the man to see a woman home. She feared he would make a scene.

'Where do you live?' she asked.

'Just off George Street,' he answered, 'in one of the city's little back streets. A mere step from Wynyard.'

'O.K.,' she said. 'In that case, let's go.'

She did not enjoy the walk from the Cross. She was sorry she had come. Now he was no longer sober, he covertly mocked her beliefs, engaged her in argument. She felt confused, uncertain, anxious. They finally reached a grey, storied building grimed with the dust of many years.

'Well, here we are,' he said, 'thy own little den of sin. Allow me to show you in.'

As he still held her wrist in an unyielding grip, she followed him perforce along a dreary hall and up an ill-kempt staircase. A stale smell of steak and onions wafted around her. He saw her nose wrinkle in distaste.

'This little labyrinth,' he explained, 'houses a score of tenants, all drinking away their poor rotting souls behind those little wooden doors.'

With his free hand he peeled a blister of paint from a door facing the top of the landing.

'This derelict is mine, no better, no worse than the rest. We all cook in the communal kitchen below. As your nose indicates we are fond of onions, flavoured with an occasional cockroach or, for variety, a little rat excreta.'

He flung open the door and Mandy found herself in a curious, long L-shaped room notable above all for its disorder. A dirty pot stood on a tiny meth-stove in one corner. nor the rest, books, clothes, crockery and bottles fraternised in every available space. An unmade bed jutted out behind the alcove.

'As you see,' he said sardonically, 'it needs the touch of a good woman's hand.'

'It certainly does,' said Mandy tartly.

He finally released her arm and went over to a cupboard in a corner. When he returned she saw he was carrying a bottle of gin.

'Maybe gin will please the lady better than wine.'

'Please, no,' said Mandy. 'I really don't drink.'

'Maybe I can persuade you,' he said.

Fear coiled in the pit of Mandy's stomach but she tried to appear unconcerned.

'It would amuse me,' he said. 'to make one of the Evangelical society a little drunk.'

'Don't be childish,' said Mandy firmly-watching him warily as he reached for a bottle of lemon from a nearby chair.

'Let's play some of those records you mentioned.'

He looked at her curiously, then began to laugh

'What records?' he asked.

Mandy floundered. 'You know - you said' -

He laughed again.

'Records, my dear, are the modern equivalent of etchings.'

'Etchings?' said Mandy. 'I don't understand.'

His eyes narrowed. He looked her up and down. Then he swore.

'My God,' he said, 'I don't believe you do. You have a lot to learn, haven't you? Come here.'

Mandy did not move. He picked up the drink he had been mixing and advanced towards her.

'This,' he said, 'should be a perfect introduction to the joys of alcohol.'

He placed it on the table near her.

'Go away,' she said. She picked up her coat.

'You're not leaving?' he questioned in a voice that had no question in it.

'Get away,' she said.

'Not yet,' he answered.

Suddenly he pulled her to him. She felt his mouth hard on hers, the hair of his beard prickling her skin.

'I want you, Mandy,' he said. 'I've wanted you for months. With your nice soft little-girl airs. We could live here. I could create you, Mandy, bring you to life.'

'A new Pygmalion,' she thought ironically as she struggled to free herself.

'Let me go,' she repeated. 'You're mad.'

'Never,' he replied. 'Never, my dear. I'm not your pure little Keith. Or is he not so pure, eh?'

Anger again flooded her, swept across her fear, and, being a Brown, in anger, she acted. Her fingers closed around the glass. Bringing up her knee she jabbed him in the stomach, then broke the glass over his head.

In the shock of pain he released her.

She opened the door and ran. As she reached the bottom of the stairs she saw him on the landing, gin and lemon streaking down his cheeks and through his beard. To her surprise he made no attempt to pursue her. He simply leaned over the railing and called down at her.

'You win, my pet. I'm beginning to like you more and more. When you tire of the tabernacle look me up. There's a refuge here too. By the way, you forgot your book.'

He tossed it over the stair and it fell with a clatter at her feet. For a second she hesitated.

'Pick it up, Mandy,' he called. 'I bought it for you. If

you'd like to know, I enjoyed my Christian afternoon of tea and coffee. I'm sorry I spoilt it by being too impetuous.'

She felt tears rush into her eyes but she picked up the book, hastily drying her lashes as she did so.

'Why, Mandy,' he said, 'you're crying. Perhaps you like me a little after all.'

She turned to go.

'Don't spoil your apology,' she said.

She glanced up as she spoke and was surprised by the intensity of his look.

'Don't mistake me, Mandy,' he said. 'I apologise for my clumsy actions, not the desire. If I could seduce you without winning your dislike, I should do so. But I'm not going to wait on you. Don't think it.'

Abruptly he went back to his room and slammed the door.

She left the house, perturbed.

'It proves Keith is right,' she argued to convince herself as she hurried into the underground. 'You can't fool around with passion. Without purity it's just plain sordid.'

But she wished she could not still feel the pressure of his lips on hers. She had rejected him in fear and anger, but the physical impact had not been wholly displeasing. The after-taste of pleasure lingered. In shame, she pushed the thought of it away.

After that she concentrated on Keith, but as he was now in camp their meetings were only spasmodic. It was not, moreover, possible to avoid Derek altogether. The problems raised by the group of which he was part began to interest her intensely. As her knowledge of history and philosophy broadened she felt less and less satisfied with the simple theistic theses presented by the Evangelicals.

The widening study of literature also played its part. In this field Mandy found her deepest pleasure, but her love of poetry, drama and prose led her to the contemplation of erotic love, posed problems of morality too complex, too soul-stirring to be answered by the formulas of her friends. There were other religious groups, who tried to grapple honestly with the evils of a Huxleian universe, who struggled to understand with compassion and humanity and spiritual poverty of a Studs Lonergan, who did not simply condemn the attempts to live a free life like Stephen Dedalus. They even struggled to deal with the criticisms of conventional religion found in poets like Jeffers or novelists like Butler.

But somehow these groups held no attraction for Mandy. They rationalised too readily, covered a morality as biased as her friends with too thin a veneer of sophistication. Too often they seemed neither to reject nor accept.

Mandy was beginning, moreover, to feel the attraction of a new ideal. Even though she found in many of the so-called rationalists a bigotry as dogmatic and unreasoning as her Christian friends, a self-concern as nauseating as their own, a touching belief in the words of 'her appropriate masters, there nevertheless appeared a gleam of something wider,

purser, more attractive. She began to enjoy the stimulation of arguing theories out to their logical conclusion, of wrestling with questions about reality to which she could find no satisfactory answer. She also began to experience a growing dissatisfaction with set answers to problems. The emphasis on critical thinking, political freedom and an ethic related positively to the world about her, rather than the regulation of actions in preparation for dying, appealed to her. The essential individuality of the Browns, their natural resistance to group conformity, the instability of their temperament, drew her irresistibly to the artists, poets, aesthetes and free-thinkers. If it had not been for a sense of humour that perceived the comic in their posturing, the group patterns in their own behaviour, she would have succumbed to their influence even more readily.

As it was, she could scarcely remain unconscious of Derek's presence. She found to her relief that as far as he was concerned the afternoon they had spent together might never have happened. She actually felt a trace of pique at his apparent lack of interest in her personal attractions. He treated her as a member of the class, yet even in this purely formal relationship she found stimulation. Before long she began again to enjoy an occasional argument with him. The width of his knowledge was interesting. He had read more books than had ever come her way, he could run his eye over a wall of paintings and name the artist in every case. He could discuss the techniques and forms of painters who up to date had never crossed her path. He had a knowledge of music ranging from symphony to jazz and he could play a popular tune with a deftness of touch and rhythm that Caroline would have envied.

She discovered the latter ability by accident through a political meeting that they both happened to attend. The hall was sparsely filled when she and Pat entered and most

of the audience were grouped around an old piano tapping their feet in time to the perfect beat of the music.

She pushed through the gathering to see the pianist. Across the piano his eyes met hers and his mouth quirked ironically at the surprise he read there.

'For you, my pet,' he said maliciously and the piano gave forth the choruses of her Evangelical faith, reshaped and distorted by a syncopated erotic rhythm.

She turned her back and walked away.

In the meantime she still attended the prayer meetings and talks on Christianity sponsored by her society, but she found it harder and harder to find her old deep mystical satisfaction. Only with Keith did she put the new queries and unrest behind her, partly because he simply took the depth of her faith for granted and partly because he liked her anyway. His contact with the secular life of the forces increased his dependence on her. He seemed less anxious to rush off on crusades. They spent more and more time walking, boating, picnicking together. He even began to hold her hand as a normal routine and kiss her gently on the lips in farewell. She in turn liked him because she knew he needed her.

At the end of Pearl Harbour altered the character of the war for all of them. 1912 brought with it conscription, naval disaster and Americans. As the Japanese advanced into Malaya and finally New Guinea the list of dead friends grew. Boys they had known disappeared to become merely names on a list, the dead or the missing. On some, there was never any definite information, not even at the war's end. The Sydney, the Perth, the Eighth Division. Lyndon waited for news of a boy that had mattered to her. They had worked with him at the settlement only the year before, but it never came. Throughout Sydney they stored food, built open-cut trenches and exchanged coupons. Mandy became a warden

and spent nights at the university waiting for the bombs that failed to arrive. As the year progressed more and more boys left the courses. Only the academically brilliant and the unfit remained. Derek Lancing was exempt on both counts.

On the home front, life continued as before, even if there were less tea and butter and nights were spent behind the thick wadding of black-out paper. In Queensland, Catriona waited anxiously as the arguments over the mythical Brisbane line waged right and left in Parliament. Ought she to bring the children south? Bob was a dental officer with the forces on the home front and she was rather lonely in his absence. But she never did make the final decision.

Reg's annual leave also melted away. The lack of young men increased the pressure of work at the office. He began to complain of fatigue, to speak vaguely of his 'heart' and indigestion. He became a boon to the manufacturer of patented anti-acid powders and digestive pills, but he still managed to consume his usual six o'clock quota. In the political front he was jubilant. Labour, back in office after the debacle of the thirties, was showing the country how the war ought to be run. Lang was now a god of the past. The new figure on Reg's horizon was Evatt. He retired at night behind his paper and purred at the announcements of the foreign minister even if he made his usual fuss about his meals.

As the war continued Sydney became a new town. Every street corner, every café, the Trocadero, the Cross was filled with Yanks: gobs and G.I.s, marines, officers with money to spare to buy girls orchids and a chivalry that opened doors, pulled out chairs, held out coats with a servility to which the Australian girl was unaccustomed. The signs of their presence were everywhere. While dining with Keith, Mandy touched the underside of the table only to encounter a score or more tiny wads of chewing gum, cached during a meal and

then forgotten. It was impossible to sit in the botanical gardens without becoming the recipient of the confidences of some lonely soul from Texas or New York or Oregon.

'Why don't you come out with me?' said a young mailman from Virginia who found Mandy curled in the sun chewing sandwiches between bouts of book work at the public library.

'Because I don't know you,' she said. 'And what's more, I'm busy.'

'I don't know any girls here,' said the soldier. 'Still if you won't come I suppose you won't. I can't force you.'

He propped his chin on his hand watching the antics of a cat stalking pigeons.

'I have a cat at home,' he said. 'A real oddity. He's twice as big as that fellow but there's nothing very odd about that. The strange thing is he has six toes on one foot.'

'You don't say,' said Mandy.

'I do say,' said the soldier, then anxiously, 'you're laughing at me.'

'No,' said Mandy. 'Truly I'm not. Go on. I like cats.'

'It's not the cat really,' said the boy. 'It's just nice to talk about home...'

'You should have asked your mailman to dinner, Mandy,' said Nena. 'He was probably lonely.'

'Why wouldn't you go out with him?' said Caroline. 'It might have been fun. I had a great time with Jim and Phil.'

'You are slow,' said Lyndon.

'I don't know,' said Mandy. 'I don't like pickups. But you're right, Nena, I should have brought him home.'

That spring Keith took her to meet his parents. They lived in a neat comfortable villa in the Bexley area. The house was brick with a veranda, the gardens orderly but uninspired, the fence white-painted wood, the lawn an emerald perfection. From the outset, Mandy felt that Mrs Dane did not like

her. She was a thin, narrow woman whose face betrayed neither emotion nor affection. She was also house-proud. Mandy was afraid to move in the little lounge room in case she disturbed the lace covers on the sofa or knocked over the vase of flowers on the piano.

'I wish they wouldn't,' she thought, eyeing the latter, then smiled as she imagined Caroline's reaction. Caroline would have asked her hostess to move them, her horror at the thought of damage to strings being more deep-rooted than her manners.

Mrs Dane said frostily.

'We barely see poor Keith these days. They don't give him much leave. You've been out together a lot lately, haven't you?'

'Not really,' said Mandy sweetly. 'He has such a good sense of duty he always spends at least one day with you.'

On the opposite wall a stern text leaving no doubt about the fate of the ungodly stared down at her inappropriately adorned with roses and forget-me-nots. Mrs Dane followed her eyes.

'God has his rightful place in this home,' she said. 'There's no reason why Keith should ever neglect his duty.'

'I'm sure there isn't,' said Mandy.

'What are you going to be?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Really,' said Mrs Dane. 'I thought you were studying with some purpose in mind.'

A devil nudged Mandy's elbow.

'Oh no,' she answered. 'I just waste my father's money.'

Keith laughed, a little nervously.

'She kidding you, mother. She's a first-rate arts student. After all, none of us know what we'll be doing these days. Look at me.'

Mrs Dane almost sniffed.

'It's hard for boys, now,' she said, 'but, in my day, girls didn't enrol at a university unless they were going to be doctors or teachers.'

'That will probably be my fate too,' laughed Mandy. 'After all, it's in the family.'

The formality of the visit was relieved by the arrival of Keith's father. He was round, red-faced, fair-haired, and quite obviously ungodly. He sat next to Mandy for the evening meal and patted her hand encouragingly at frequent intervals. He had, she also suspected, swallowed several reinforcing glasses of beer before braving the rigours of the home front. Mandy had lived with Reg too long not to be an expert on after-work dalliance. The devil in her that evening played up to him and by the time she left for home he gave her a resounding kiss on the cheek, to Keith's obvious embarrassment and his mother's frigid disapproval.

As he walked with her to the train, Keith apologised for him.

'Don't be silly,' said Mandy. 'He's nice and human. That's all.'

Keith looked stonily ahead.

'We've known each other some time now, Mandy. I don't want to deceive you. You wouldn't have realised it but my father's good spirits were produced by alcohol.'

'I knew that,' said Mandy quietly, but Keith ignored the interruption.

'He's made mother's life a misery from start to finish. She's been a saint. There have even been other women, but she has never once reproached him.'

Mandy rested her hand lightly on his arm.

'Don't be too hard, Keith. Saints are sometimes rather difficult to live with, you know.'

'Not mother. She's been wonderful. I don't know what I'd have done without her ...'

Mandy leant back in the comfortable seat of the electric train and thought.

She had been right, not Mary, that morning above the Hawkesbury. Who knew the problems of another? She began to understand Keith's fear of sensuality, his obsession with chastity. Mother controlled his thinking.

'But he looks like his father,' thought Mandy, 'not his mother. Perhaps in his heart of hearts he knows that. Or does he? Is he simply scared that he might resemble him? Derek at least makes no pretence about the carnality of his desires.'

Mandy closed her eyes.

'Poor old Mr Dane,' was her last sleepy thought as the rhythm of the train jogged her into an unthinking doze . . .

The following week, Grandma Vicky died. Mandy went with Reg to the memorial service conducted in the old Baptist church on the fringe of the main city area. Vicky had been its first member, long before the invention of the trams and cars that now whizzed along the crowded street and permeated the hymns with the crash of modern traffic.

The pastor tried to express some of the gratitude of the church to its oldest member but as he was so much more commonplace than the subject of his address, he did not succeed in bringing out the real goodness and integrity of the woman he honoured.

Mandy felt as if something essential had passed from her life forever and she wondered what Reg felt. Vicky was his mother just as Ann had been her mother, but perhaps death on the threshold of ninety made less impact.

'She used to be awfully pretty,' said Reg suddenly as they walked along the street to the train. 'She had red-gold hair and blue eyes. She always did the cooking in a big white apron over her long skirt.'

'Why,' thought Mandy, 'he doesn't remember an old,

white-haired lady at all. He remembers the mother he knew as a little boy.'

For the first time in many years she slipped her hand into his and felt the firm, warm touch of his fingers that recalled to her the Saturdays and the white-clad cricketers of long ago.

Meanwhile Keith was aware that his time in Australia was drawing to a close. Mandy felt in their relationship a growing urgency on his side from which her own being sheered away. She had said she would always be there if he needed her, but she was now scared that Keith was going to ask her to marry him, scared because even though she liked him, she knew innately that marriage between them was impossible. Basically she realised that she should have severed their relationship long ago and yet he had been such a comfortable source of affection that she was reluctant to lose him altogether.

As the final weeks ticked away he seemed troubled, less assured. To her surprise he asked her to the theatre, the pictures, a university ball rather than church. She said nothing but it seemed to her that in these last days in Australia he was trying to taste all the pleasures of life that he had previously rejected. On his final evening they took a ferry trip around the harbour from Cremorne to Mosman and later Neilson Park. In the shadow of the rocks, they sat beside one another on the chilly sand. Suddenly he drew her to him and kissed her, his trembling hands exploring the contours of her body. For a few minutes she allowed him to handle her, conscious of his inexperienced fingers and lips and her own feeling of fear that should have been pleasure. Then she gently drew away.

'What's happened, Keith?' she asked. 'Somehow you've been different lately.'

'I know,' he said, trying to kiss her again.

‘Why?’

He ran the sand through his fingers, embarrassed.

‘I think, Mandy, it’s the thought of death, the knowledge that I might never come back again. No more Neilson Park or Sydney Harbour or Hawkesbury or anything. Don’t think I’m afraid to die. I’m not. I still have my faith and I still believe in eternal life with God. But somehow it’s not quite the same as being alive here and now. They say that in death we won’t desire the sort of things I desire on this earth. Mandy, my darling, is it really so wrong to enjoy oneself a little? It never seems to hurt the other chaps in camp. I want to relax, to enjoy, to love, to feel, just a bit anyway.’

‘Warmth and colour and light,’ said Mandy softly. ‘I’ve never thought they were evil but you’ve never agreed with me. I think you’re right to have a little fun. I don’t believe God created this earth purely for our misery.’

‘Oh, Mandy,’ he said drawing her to him again, ‘I do love you.’

He began to kiss her, on her mouth and then her breasts. She felt his hand fumbling with her clothing, moving across her knees, then along the inside of her legs.

He pressed his body against hers.

She found that she was trembling but not with anticipation. With icy clarity she realised that he wanted to lie with her and that she had no desire to continue. She was sorry for him. She was prepared to make love with him, to give him some pleasure, but she was not prepared in the face of their previous relationship for a complete assault upon her virginity. He had been too platonic to succeed now. She tightened the muscles of her legs.

‘You’ll let me, won’t you, Mandy?’ he pleaded ‘Just once before I go?’

‘What if you never come back?’ she said.

'I will, Mandy, I will. I promise you. I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, honestly.'

Common sense reasserted itself. She sat upright, pushing him away with her knees.

'No, Keith,' she said, 'no.'

He tried to persist but she drew away.

'No,' she said again as kindly as she could.

He looked sulky.

'You needn't worry,' he said. 'I'm not a heel. I'll marry you afterwards, honest I will. We can get married in Sydney tonight on our way back.'

Anger flicked her.

'How good of you,' she responded. 'But I don't want to marry you. I don't even want to be with you. Perhaps if you'd been a little more virile in the past I might have been ready for you by now, but I have no intention of placing you under an obligation in return for favours rendered.'

'I know you think me a first-class hypocrite, Mandy, but I'm not. I've grown up, that's all.'

'I don't believe it,' said Mandy. 'By the time you reach England you'll be looking for another nice pure little girl. You'll decide mother was right about me. You may even wonder who's sharing the sand with me in your absence.'

'I wouldn't, Mandy,' he begged. 'I wouldn't, truly.'

She stood up.

'I want to go home,' she said.

He nodded, obviously depressed, still troubled by desire, but conscience-stricken through long habit.

'I'm sorry, Mandy. You're quite right. I forgot myself. I should never have expected a girl like you to – well – you know –'

'Why not say it in plain English,' she said icily. 'The word is intercourse. But don't think I rejected you because of my principles. It's yours I can't stomach.'

He looked perplexed, worried, and she was suddenly sorry for him.

'I don't understand you,' he said. 'I should have waited, I know, but you seemed willing.'

'I'm sorry, Keith,' she conceded. 'I suppose it's my fault in many ways. The trouble is, we're different kinds of people.'

'We're not, Mandy,' he said vehemently. 'We're not. You're just upset.'

'Not a bit,' she answered. 'I've just recovered my common sense, that's all.'

She took her lipstick and comb out of her purse and set about restoring her dishevelled appearance while he waited helplessly beside her.

Keith went away, but in spite of her rejection their friendship continued. It was Keith who made the first attempt to heal the breach. A letter arrived almost as soon as he reached England.

Darling Mandy,

You may not wish me to write to you but I cannot throw away the memory of the past two years just like that. I was wrong. I should have asked you to marry me many months ago but you seemed so young and I am afraid I masked my fear of sex in the pursuit of religion. That is no excuse, I know, but I am asking you to try to understand my position. You met my father and you liked him, even sympathised with him. But you didn't have to live with him, to watch your mother patiently bearing every indignity a man can inflict on a good woman. I vowed I should never be like him no matter what the temptation. I vowed I should never marry until I was sure I could give a girl so much more than he ever gave mother.

'Mother, mother, mother' thought Mandy. 'I'm sick of mother.'

I tried to deny my humanity in case I should prove to be completely his son but this last year in camp has shown me that such austerity is itself dangerous. I have come to know my fellow-men a little better and in doing so have ceased to despise them. Christ was not a recluse after all.

My previous repression of emotion made my passion uncontrollable. That last month, I realised for the first time that I might never see you again and I'm afraid my desire to possess you led me to forget all the purity of love that we had shared in the past. I did not even think of the problems I might be creating for you. I can only apologise, Mandy.

I know now that physical love is possible without any disgrace to my Christian faith provided the teachings of our Lord are not violated. In fact it seems to me that my faith could grow with the stimulus of love to be even more wonderful than it is now. Without Christ I do not think I could endure my present life. Prayer does count for something when you're lonely and quite frankly scared stiff. I know you will add your prayers to mine just as we have so often explored the message of the scriptures together.

Even if you feel you can never marry me, Mandy, do keep writing. Mother writes regularly of course, but she has not the gift of words – only love. With your letters beside me, I can imagine the streets of Sydney, the quadrangle of the university, our Christian friends. And with you alone, Mandy, the tang of gun leaves, tea tasting of smoke, and the rocky curves of the Hawkesbury. And perhaps an odd phrase here and there will take me back to bread and butter at midnight in an oil-lit kitchen.

Whatever you think, I love you, Mandy, and always shall.

Yours in Christ,
Keith.

And so Mandy wrote too. She knew he would never understand the real source of her anger that final evening,

and she felt quite incapable of ever explaining to him that the scriptures were no longer a solace to her. She doubted, moreover, if she had any right to threaten his faith at a time when he so obviously needed it. So she wrote to him as he had requested, letters which avoided the personal but gave him news and descriptions of the people and places that they both knew. She avoided any expression of love, any phrase that might delude him into thinking that she returned his affection. She even abandoned their traditional form of Christian address, simply signing her name. He made no comment.

On the home front her problem was complicated, as she no longer mixed to any extent with the group that contained their mutual friends. If Mandy felt a certain loneliness in her new position, she countered it by taking a more active part in the debating clubs and the political societies where she became known for her increasing support of critical thinking.

She was now approaching the final stages of her university course, and study also took a great deal of her time. A number of her rationalist friends had gone. Lancing had graduated and was working for the Commonwealth in some obscure clerical post in the Department of War Organisation of Industry. He still appeared for meetings of the philosophical society, as ironic and bantering as ever, but he made no deliberate effort to seek her company and the eight-forty-five a.m. to five-fifteen p.m. efforts required by his employers no doubt curtailed his coffee shop activities, at least in daylight hours.

'Well, my pet,' he said to Mandy at one chance meeting, 'who am I to mock you? You, the servant of the church, me the slave of public regimentation. So be it.'

In her final year, the day after her twenty-first birthday, Reg died. It was so unexpected that Mandy found the reality

hard to grasp. It was true that he had been grumbling for months about his indigestion. The packets of patent tablets increased in quantity, but he was working hard and the family, used to the periodic upsets produced by habitual alcohol, barely noticed his complaint. He refused to have a holiday and he refused to see a doctor. And in spite of his grumbles he still seemed his old self in most ways. As prosperity returned, and in deference to what he called heartburn, he treated himself to a taxi every evening and rolled home from the station with the air of a Czar. The hams grew fatter, the bags of fruit bigger with the assistance of motor transport. In the few months before his death he came very close to thinking of the taxi as his own private car.

'Damned fellow kept me waiting tonight,' he said, stalking into the dining-room. 'No respect for his regular customers at all.'

He was late the night he died, but this time it was not the taxi's fault. He had gone to collect her birthday present, a tiny dressing-table set, bowl, tray, candlesticks, that a friend had made for him personally. To his disappointment it had not been ready for her birthday, so he was determined not to miss another day. Triumphant he laid it in her lap and watched with pleasure as she opened each tiny parcel with delight.

'It's lovely,' she said and his face lit up with his old joy at her appreciation.

He went to bed early, complaining that he felt unwell and at midnight he died, swiftly, uncomprehending, from a coronary occlusion.

Mandy felt a grey emptiness. For years she had believed her life at Fernleigh died with Ann, but through the drone of the funeral service she found that any life dies a hundred times through minute resurrections of memory. Amidst her grieving aunts and uncles, a prostrate Caroline, she did not

cry, but an agony seized her so that she had to dig the nails of her fingers sharply into her hands to prevent herself screaming.

She supposed the pastor was doing his best in the scientific clinical atmosphere of the crematorium, but everyone knew Reg had not entered a church for years. Why bother to pretend? She closed her ears against the professionally intonated voice – ‘I first remember our brother’ – and she smelt again the thick warm scent of his coat as he held her in his arms, a bulwark against terror; tweed and smoke from the everlasting bowl of his pipe; the click of billiard balls across the green cloth; her first memory, a sense rather than a recollection of his presence.

‘I remember he and his brothers had a godly upbringing and were baptised in . . .’

‘But you don’t remember,’ she thought, ‘you don’t remember how he fell in the baptismal bath by accident or how he christened all his cats and dogs in it.’

‘A generous man, always willing to help others . . .’

The constant bags of sweets floated across Mandy’s eyes, the endless little comics mingled with the sweet-sour taste of sherbet cones and the oven-fresh halfpenny cakes from Parramatta Road.

‘A man upright in virtue a scorner of vice . . .’

She saw him then walking up the station steps at Redwood, an odd grey hair slipping loose beneath his grey felt hat, a bundle of fruit as big as himself clutched in front against his paunch. Caught in the past she chuckled inadvertently.

‘The horse won,’ she thought, then realised in horror her respectable macabre surroundings and felt the eyes of her aunts and uncles boring into her back with disapproval.

‘Hundreds and hundreds of deaths,’ thought Mandy, ‘and every death the same death. Even Ann is more dead

now – and yet thousands of lives as well, forever and ever, details, colours, laughter, misery, all preserved in her own consciousness to be evoked by a chance phrase, a remembered scent.

‘If you have to die why don’t you really die and leave me in peace,’ she thought resentfully, ‘Never-ending death and life until my own death, and does it really end there?’

His daughters paid for his funeral. When they cleared his belongings and searched his books they found no money, but in one dressing table drawer they discovered a pile of lottery tickets, a memento to a gambling spirit that always seemed to miss the jackpot. They looked at the stack of paper: hundreds of tiny slips representing a fortune in unrealised investments. They had all been named in honour of his family. ‘Nena and Catriona’ read one, ‘Mandy and Caroline’ another, ‘Lyndon’ a third, while every dog, cat or bird that had shared their life over the last ten years had his ticket.

They took them up the yard and burnt them. There was nothing else to do, nothing else to say, but in a way the fire of his hopes seemed more final than the civilised furnace of the crematorium . . .

The following six months were a nightmare. No one was willing to make up the deficit in housekeeping money created by Reg’s death, yet, loyal as ever, her sisters insisted she finish her course. Mandy’s final examination was interspersed with the desperate problem of trying to feed three people on four to five pounds less a week. Again she was not well and physical fatigue combined with a feeling of depression arising from the unspoken criticisms around her. Even Nena and Lyndon seemed to be in permanent disagreement.

‘I want my own life,’ said Lyndon. ‘I’ve been tied to this house far too long.’

And Nena, missing Reg whom she had loved and

resenting Lyndon's far from tactful rejection of her company, sought her own means of escape.

On the Saturday preceding the school vacation she dropped her bombshell.

'I'm accepting a country appointment as deputy-head,' she announced casually at lunch.

Lyndon laid down her knife and fork.

'You can't,' she said. 'What are we going to do here?'

'Be independent,' replied Nena succinctly. 'You can manage without me by now, surely.'

'Where are you going?' asked Mandy quietly.

'Coff's Harbour,' said Nena.

'You can't leave yet,' said Lyndon. 'I've applied to join U.N.R.A.A. I'm going overseas as soon as the war ends. Mandy and Caroline can't rely on me to take over.'

'Never have,' said Mandy, and Nena twinkled at her.

Caroline fiddled with the tablecloth.

'It looks as though we're breaking up at last,' she said, 'so I may as well put in my spoke too. I'm going to marry Barry.'

Lyndon jumped.

'But he's in the Navy. He might be killed.'

'That applies to a lot of people,' said Caroline. 'And I can go on teaching while he's away.'

'You're only nineteen,' said Nena. 'Are you sure you're wise?'

Caroline looked them over, obviously amused.

'I don't think nineteen is so young these days,' she said quietly. 'Plenty of girls are marrying younger than that and plenty of boys from my generation are dead. Anyway, I'm nearly twenty.'

'And what about you, Mandy?'

'Well,' said Mandy, 'it looks as though Lyndon will have to live with me.'

They looked at one another and laughed at the thought of it.

'As a matter of fact,' said Lyndon, 'I was thinking of moving out anyway. Margaret wants me to share a flat with her.'

'I knew that,' said Nena.

'Everyone has their plans,' thought Mandy, 'everyone but me. I wonder if Lyndon would have moved out if Caroline were staying. I wonder if Nena would have gone away if Lyndon had not been making her own plans —'

An immense loneliness surrounded her. The familiar curtains, the lounge with the indent of Reg's head still upon it.

'Where do I fit?' she thought. 'Where is my home? Keith? No. God? He's dead. I'm on my own at last,' — the nightmare of childhood, the gate closing on Ann.

'There's no need to worry about me,' she said. 'I'll be getting a job, and there's always room for a single person. Lots of my friends are planning to set up by themselves. We'll have great fun. Believe me.'

Mandy was right. Homes for families were fast becoming non-existent but odd shabby little rooms with use of kitchen were not hard to find. By the end of the summer vacation she had found her room, ready for the family exodus. Caroline was married before Nena left, a simple, charming ceremony at a chapel in the heart of the city. Barry was in uniform and Caroline looked absurdly young. Mandy was bridesmaid, but there was no reception and no fuss. For the time being they were to stay on in the house at Redwood.

Mandy felt empty, drained of feeling, an emptiness intensified by her final examination results. She now had her degree, with honours, all she desired, but somehow it seemed futile. She realised for the first time that one of the satisfactions in doing well had been Reg's pride, the glow of pleasure that emanated from him as he basked in the reflected glory of his daughter's successes.

Mandy wondered idly as she scanned the newspaper if she had ever cared very much for herself. Success without praise was a sucked lemon. No doubt, in time, Nena's telegram would come, Catriona would write, Lyndon would take her out to dinner, but it would be simply a matter of congratulations. They were capable of their own achievements. They did not need hers.

She found a job in one of the numerous Commonwealth departments of the day. There were director-generals, deputy-director-generals, chairmen, secretaries, research clerks, general clerks. Every available citizen seemed to be devoted to building the white-taped files dedicated to the infinite problems and minutiae of a country at war. Her

own field was education and the hours of her day were well filled informing hopeful applicants that the government was not prepared at the moment to fulfil their lifelong ambition to study medicine by providing a grant for that purpose while younger, more suitable, candidates were available.

She still heard from Keith and she looked forward to his letters as a contact with a past more personal than her present. Did she still believe in God? She did not know. She no longer went to Evangelical meetings, drifting out of their company as silently as possible. Open defections were treated with the brain-washing techniques of a Communist state. 'What are your difficulties? What are your problems? Let us pray together, God will help you resolve your doubts.'

'But I don't want my doubts resolved,' thought Mandy. 'Not your way, anyhow.'

How could she explain that the stars, the earth no longer reflected God, that she no longer read the hand of God in the designs of the universe? God had not preserved her from her present isolation. She found nothing in the Christian gospel, nor in the politics of practising Christians to suggest that their gospel held any solution to the economic complications of a starving Asia and a war-torn Europe. They seemed just as ready to war, as ready to exploit as their non-Christian neighbours. Selfishness was termed thrift, business expediency, diligence. Was that Christ's fault? She did not think so and in her heart she would always admire the true Jesus of Galilee, but it did seem as if the doctrine of Christ was not the transforming principle that her friends believed. Bernard Shaw was right. The crucifixion was a political success. The positive Christ had died. Negative virtues, a heaven that excluded a Reg. 'I'd rather be dead for ever,' she thought. The rationalisation of problems nauseated her. In doctrines of freedom alone there

seemed some possibility for the spirit of man, here and now, to emerge, to create, to fight the lip-service to outworn principles, the juggling with truth that marked her previous acquaintances.

Her new job brought her again into contact with Mary, who had disappeared from her university post some time ago. She was working now in the same section as Mandy.

'What happened to your German friend?' asked Mandy as they lunched together in a crowded café between the crowded hours of one and two.

'He died,' said Mary.

She took out a cigarette and offered one to Mandy.

'Why not?' thought Mandy and accepted it, conscious of her lack of knowledge in the handling of it. She realised, however, that Mary was not even aware of her inexperience. She simply took Mandy's acceptance of it for granted.

'I'm sorry,' said Mandy. 'What happened?'

'T.B.,' said Mary shortly.

For a second she was silent, flicking the ash of her cigarette in grey spirals into the ash tray.

'You remember that last morning on the Hawkesbury, Mandy?'

'Yes.'

'Well, I had my idyll. I don't regret it. When they knew he was dying they released him. He spent most of the remaining year in hospital, but we had six weeks together. I had a baby later but it died.'

Mandy did not know what to say. 'She no longer uses blue nail polish,' she thought irrelevantly. She stubbed her cigarette out, half-smoked. She did not really like it.

'Thank you for telling me,' she said.

'I wanted to tell someone,' said Mary. 'Someone capable of feeling.'

Mandy felt humbled.

When she returned from work that evening the letter was waiting for her. It was from a friend of Keith's in the same unit. She read it twice before she really understood. He was dead, killed in a raid over Berlin some weeks ago. The friend had written at Keith's request. It was an arrangement they had made with one another in the event of death.

'His mother could have rung me,' she thought, then realised that she had not given his parents her changed address.

She sat on the bed. Would she ring Mrs Dane now? The telephone was in the hall outside her door, but she did not move. Suddenly there seemed no point. His mother did not like her. She was not engaged to him. There had been only one thing she could have done for him and she had refused. She thought of Mary.

'How little I am in comparison,' she reflected. 'What would it have mattered if I had lain with him that night? I wonder if he found a girl in England or if he died, never knowing -' It seemed so pointless, the cult of purity in the face of the sudden annihilation that was war. Her remorse wiped out the deeper reasons for her refusal, her knowledge that she did not love him, that he would misinterpret her action.

'I needn't have married him,' she reasoned. 'I could have merely satisfied him. What price my dried-up chastity, all the narrow morality of my self-satisfied little world?'

She flung herself on her bed and buried her face in the pillow but no tears came. She only felt bitter, bitter at her own inadequacy, her own illusions.

On the way to work the following morning, she bought herself a packet of cigarettes and a new brighter lipstick. She was conscious of a desire to live, to experience for herself all the pleasure Keith too had sought in the end. She was, at last, looking for life itself.

She went the next week to the annual philosophy conference and felt a new comfort at the sight of her old rationalist friends.

'Good evening, Mr Lancing,' she said slipping into the empty seat beside him. 'Evening, Jane, hi, Pat.'

'I am honoured,' he said, turning to her.

'Are you?' said Mandy. 'Well, I guess we public servants ought to stick together.'

'Good God,' he laughed, 'you too.'

Mandy took the packet of cigarettes out of her purse and offered him one. For a fraction of a second his eyes flickered in surprise, then he quickly snuffed out all reflection of emotion. Bending over he lit her cigarette as well as his own, his eyes cool, appraising, studying hers thoughtfully. She met them with a glance of pure mockery that left him disturbed but strangely hopeful.

The paper on ethics was a good one and Mandy found herself joining in the ensuing discussion. At the end of the meeting Jane leant over.

'Max and Pete and Ann are dropping over to my place for coffee,' she said; 'either of you like to come?'

'Love to,' said Mandy.

In Jane's flat the atmosphere was cosy, informal, friendly. They sat on rugs and rediscussed the paper surrounded by the now inevitable Van Goghs.

'I don't like the linguistic approach,' said Max. 'What do we mean? As if we don't bloody well know.'

'Of course, you don't know,' returned Mandy with a laugh. 'Goodness means one thing to me, something else to you and there's the end of the problem, at least according to our friend from Melbourne.'

'Like hell,' said Jane.

'There's the beginning,' said Derek.

'Exactly,' said Mandy.

'Hey, Jane,' called Pete, 'haven't you anything stronger than coffee? I'm drying out fast.'

'Don't be a dill,' said Jane, 'of course I have. What would the company like?'

'Whisky,' said Derek.

'Beer,' said Max.

'Gin,' said Ann.

Mandy realised they were all looking at her.

'You don't drink, do you, Mandy?' said Jane. 'I have some lemon here.'

Mandy looked up, laughter spreading from her eyes to her mouth.

'Who says I don't drink?' she answered. 'Make mine whisky too.'

'Good girl!' said Pete. 'Mandy's decided to be one of us at last.'

'But my dear girl,' said Ann. 'What will your Evangelical friends say?'

Mandy took a sip and felt a glow of warmth seep through her.

'I should say they're too busy praying for their own souls even to notice my defection,' she said.

Derek said nothing. Raising his glass he too drank and his eyes met hers across the rim. In them Mandy found a laughter and an irony to match her own mood, and a challenge she could not quite define. She felt the blood in her veins quicken into life.

'To Mandy,' said Jane raising her glass, 'our latest convert.'

'You sound so like my late friends,' Mandy murmured, 'that I feel quite at home.'

'Surely not,' said Ann.

Solemnly they all rose and clinked their glasses together.

'To Mandy,' they responded.

They sat down and conversation flowed again.

Derek moved closer and slipped an arm around her shoulder. She felt his glass touch hers even as his lips touched her ear.

'To my Mandy,' he whispered.

Smiling she moved out of his grasp.

'Derek, my dear,' she said sedately, 'you presume too much.'

Taking his hand, she pulled his arm back across her breast and leant against him with a sigh of pure satisfaction.

'But I'm glad,' she added.

PART THREE

The Camp of the Free-thinkers

The next three months were some of the happiest that Mandy ever lived. By 1914 it was evident that the war was not likely to end in defeat. D-Day was approaching in Europe, while Japan under pressure from MacArthur was retreating from island to island. Not that the public was ever sure of the truth. The situation behind the news was as elusive to the reader as the metaphysical world of ideas to a materialist philosopher. But it was now felt that the war would be won and the mushroom cloud had not yet hovered above Hiroshima to cast its shadow over the peace.

Mandy did not go and live with Derek immediately. The strictures of a lifetime are not broken quite so easily, but she no longer resisted his advances. Evening after evening she dined with him, danced with him on crowded smoky floors, too dense to move in comfort, saw most of the films worth seeing and a number of plays that were not, but their enjoyment was enhanced by the little theatre atmosphere, the curtained dusty rooms, the enthusiasm of the players and occasionally from the amateur efforts emerged a performance really worth watching, a play of poetry and intensity that could find no backer on the commercial stage. They went to parties with their friends. They drank and argued and drank again. Mandy learnt to feel the silence of a city in the hours before dawn, the dehumanised, deserted streets that gave personality to the grey buildings, and she grew used to handling a day's work with a bare two or three hours sleep. Together they roamed the streets of Sydney. They took ferries and walked along the foreshores back to the northern tram routes. They made love

in Rushcutter's Bay Park and ate hamburgers in a nearby shop to finish off the evening. They read Villon together amidst the gardens of Taronga Park and they kissed madly and erotically, 'sitting on the harbour wall with Fort Macquarie and the water at their back and the green bank of the botanical gardens in front of them. Did it matter if the passing populace clicked their tongues in disapproval? They did not care.

Finally Derek protested.

'We're getting no sleep, Mandy. Why don't you move in with me? Think of all the trips home it will save.'

'Your proposal is not an honourable one?' asked Mandy.

'Of course not,' he answered. 'You know very well neither of us wants to marry. But we do want to live with one another. Or are you still reluctant, my pet?'

Mandy brushed back her hair thoughtfully with one hand.

'No, not reluctant. Merely cautious. I suppose I do have to decide.'

'Yes, Mandy, you do. I'm not going to wait forever.'

For a moment she felt the same tremor of apprehension that she had felt at Neilson Park with Keith. It was true that this time she desired physical intimacy as completely as he did. Yet the roots of her being, her puritan soul still made her draw back from a relationship whose very nature could be no more than temporary. There was no vision of permanence in it. She knew Derek would leave her if she suggested it. Love for Derek had to be free love, no chains, no bonds. He was right, too. She did not desire to marry him. She had dreams and ambitions of her own. One day the war would end. Her natural asceticism, moreover, drew her away from an endless future in his company. Yet she also wondered how far any love could go that dared not even contemplate permanence, what any love was worth that could not envisage responsibility, that rejected its

productive, creative aspect completely. And yet, she could not bear to leave him. There had to be someone. She could not live without family, without affection, indefinitely.

'The lady consents,' she said lightly, and, not insensitive to the struggle within her, he gently drew her to him in reply.

And in intimacy she was not disappointed. The L-shaped room still smelt of onions, it still pivoted on disorder, but in the alcove behind the main room she found passion and satisfaction. Her being responded to his in the act of physical embrace and they satisfied each other completely. Lying beside him in the too narrow bed, she felt his warmth and affection overflow and break through his natural flippancy and self-defence. They clung to one another in an agony of love, each a buffer against the loneliness of the other.

For the first few months the joy of fulfilled passion sustained her against the nastiness of her immediate surroundings. She even survived the filth of the communal kitchen. She hated the dirty, barely-washed floor, the cooking-range spattered with the grease of long consumed meals, that smelt eternally of escaping gas, the food-encrusted sink. Being by upbringing and heredity a natural cook, the conditions gave her no scope for her talents. There was always another tenant, dressing gown flapping around her legs, hair in pins beneath a gaudy scarf, trying to get her share of the stove. With the rest of the motley population she learnt to eat out of tins, warmed hastily over the smelly flame. She disliked the breakfast rush so intensely that Derek usually cooked and brought hers up to the room where she lay huddled beneath the bed-clothes. She had never liked baked beans, but after struggling through a pile of them each morning for six months, half warmed on an inadequately toasted square of bread, she loathed them. But they were Derek's most readily concocted dish and while she refused

to face the morning rigours of the kitchen she was forced to endure them.'

But taken all round life was fun. They could always eat their main meal in a restaurant and the mad whirl of entertainment continued, relieved now by the evenings spent at home in bed, making love. Their own parties were a great success. Every Friday night they entertained. Guests did not have to be invited. The ability to find a bottle of alcohol was the only requirement. First their friends came, but as the evening became well-known, they soon grew used to the growing horde of people, many of whom they had never seen before.

'Come with us,' said Ann or Max or Peter to their new acquaintances. 'Everyone goes to Mandy and Derek's on Friday.'

Each week Mandy spent her lunch-hour hunting for the tastiest cheeses and sausages in Sydney while Derek struggled to restore their 'cellar', a shaky cupboard in the corner of the room. Their glasses, salvaged from the containers of various commercial spreads, grew daily. They stacked them on a tiny table at one side of the room with the bottles ranged around them on the floor. The guests had only to help themselves. Each successive Friday became noisier.

'Beat it up, Derek,' they yelled and Derek obediently knocked out a blues rhythm with his hands on an empty tin, a rhythm to which the crowd swayed and shouted.

'You haven't recited for us yet. Come on, Pete. Let her go.'

And Pete streaked to the centre of the room and with his arm around Derek's shoulders, they together chanted the choruses from Joyce's *Ulysses*.

'O, Mary lost the pin of her drawers,
She didn't know what to do.'

'To keep it up,' bellowed the rest, 'to keep it up.' And they whirled around the room clutching realistically at their midriffs.

'Encore, encore,' yelled the girls and the ritual began all over again.

'"Foggy, foggy dew",' they shouted and Max, who had a fine tenor voice, obliged while the rest of them chimed in mournfully at appropriate intervals.

'We ain't had "Old Fingelstein",' muttered a boy in the corner.

'Or the "Good Ship Venus",' mocked a girl next to him.

'Balls as heavy as lead,' muttered a voice almost out to it from the floor. With a laugh they traced the form of the speaker from his boots just protruding from the cover of the bed, to his head huddled in the darkest corner beneath the mattress.

'Leave the poor bastard alone. He's had it,' yelled Ann.

And crawling under the bed she rocked the recumbent head in her arms, crooning an indecent version of Brahms' lullaby above it.

'Come on, Mandy,' called Derek. 'Don't be modest. Time we had the baptism.'

'Not modest,' said Mandy dreamily. 'Just waitin' for the right mood. Dumdedumdedumdedumdedumdedumda.'

'Ladies and gentlemen, or rather men and women,' announced Derek bowing to his friends, 'our darling Mandy - three cheers everyone - is about to enact the greatest moment of her life: total immersion.'

Mandy pulled a sheet off her bed and swathed it around her. Tottering to her feet she climbed onto the only available chair in the room.

'Our heroine,' continued Derek, 'takes the dais, while I,

folks, wallow here on the floor in water up to my knees. Brr, it's cold.'

'Amanda Brown, do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, your most precious, dyed-in-the-wool saviour?'

'I sure do,' said Mandy, 'and you, honey boy, ought to accept him, too.'

Then, shutting her eyes, she stepped off the chair into space, landing in a clutter of sheet and bottles on top of Derek.

'Sing up, you bastards, can't you,' came Derek's muffled voice from under the chaos. 'She's being baptised.'

'"Follow, follow, I will follow Jesus",' yelled the crowd as they had been taught to respond, then they all shambled to their feet and, touching hands to shoulders, marched round and round the room.

'"Onward, Christian soldiers." "Hallelujah, I'm a bum." "Stand up, stand up for Jesus".'

Mandy looked up through the tangle of sheet and saw the contemplative eyes of a stranger upon her. He was in uniform. She wondered why she had not noticed him earlier. Their guests did not include many soldiers.

She broke away from the circle.

'So you don't approve,' she said belligerently.

A pair of grave hazel eyes in whose depths lurked a spark of genuine humour looked into hers.

'I was vastly amused,' he answered. 'I was only wondering if you were.'

'Damn you!' said Mandy. 'There's no place for puritans here.'

'That's what I was thinking.'

She felt angry but decided to shrug off the remark. He couldn't really know anything about her.

'Can I get you a drink?' he asked.

'All right,' she said wearily, flopping on the bed.

When he returned she looked at him with frank curiosity.

'We aren't usually honoured by members of the forces,' she said. 'I don't think I know you.'

She heard Derek's voice at her elbow.

'Don't tell me you've never met old Ben. Known him since I was in the cradle.'

'Hi, Derek,' replied the stranger. 'Thought you wouldn't mind if I dropped in.'

'Thrilled pink,' said Derek and Mandy realised with surprise he really was. 'Have you met Mandy?'

'That pleasure has been mine for the past five minutes,' he said. 'I was trying to get a little better acquainted when you turned up.'

'Ben did law,' said Derek, turning to Mandy, 'then arts. He was finishing the arts section when I began. He was always in everything, but the army snaffled him for service in its education section. He's been floating around the Pacific for a year or so.'

'Home for good now. I hope.'

'Whoopee!' said Derek. 'Then we'll be seeing you regularly.'

'Perhaps,' said Ben, 'but I am busy and I'm getting older. Not quite so gay these days.'

'Don't believe it,' said Derek.

A fluffy blonde in slacks appeared at Derek's side. Mandy recognised her as an arts student, a fresher of the previous year to whom Derek had been rather attentive.

'Do pour me a drink, Derek sweet,' she whispered huskily, 'I can't get the stopper out. You don't mind me taking him, do you, Mandy darling?'

She flashed a provocative glance at Ben.

Mandy smiled sweetly.

'He's as free as a bird, Elaine dear. Run along with her, won't you, Derek? There's a good boy. The poor

child's in real difficulty. I can finish my talk with Ben.'

For one second he gave her a look in which murder glinted, then to prevent himself being pulled forcibly across the room by little Elaine, he went.

Ben looked at her quizzically.

'Don't you like her?' he asked.

'Empty-headed but cunning,' said Mandy succinctly.

'You must learn to suffer fools gladly,' he said.

'I can,' she returned, 'but I can't bear their constant company, like Derek. It's so damned deflating. I always thought he liked me because I'm reasonably intelligent.'

'That could still be true,' said Ben smiling. 'The two tastes are not exclusive. Yet there is another possible reason.'

He eyed her coolly from head to foot and she knew from the surge of heat in her face that she was blushing. In spite of her embarrassment, she felt pleasure and realised that she liked this man. She had not noticed before that he towered above both herself and Derek, while the smile which lifted the corners of his mouth had a maturity lacking in every other face in the room including her own. She felt moved to assert her own integrity of motive again.

'It's not that I'm jealous,' she said.

'Aren't you?' he replied. 'But of course not. The freedom code leaves no place for jealousy, does it? It's only love that does that.'

'Don't talk in riddles,' she said impatiently. 'It's not your business anyway and I'm too tired to argue. I only wish to enjoy myself.'

'At all costs?'

'Let's skip the subject,' she replied. 'Come and help me hand out the supper.'

'With pleasure.'

Jealousy? During the next three months she was given

plenty of opportunities to analyse her own emotions in this connection. It had not taken her long to discover that freedom implied for her lover the right to get out with other people whenever it suited him. Once the novelty of new passion wore off he enjoyed the stimulus of trying to attract other girls. She knew he lunched regularly with Elaine and two or three like her. Occasionally if Mandy were busy he spent the evening with Ann or went out with Jane. Even though Ann was beautiful with her long sun-tipped hair and slanted pale blue eyes and Mandy was aware that she herself was not, she did not resent Ann. Ann was gay and intelligent and had known Derek for years. If he had deserted her to live with Ann she would have hated it but she could have respected him. The Elaines were another matter. As Ben had hinted, she was jealous. The lisping, whispering voice, the fluffy feminine wiles, the borrowed comments on all topics from life to literature, irritated her. Why did Derek hide with such a smirking air of enjoyment in the mantle of her too obvious admiration?

'Have we got to have Elaine every Friday?' she asked as they snuggled down in bed one week-end.

She immediately felt his withdrawal.

'Why not?' he asked.

'There's nothing to her. She's a phony,' said Mandy.

'You mean,' he said icily, 'she likes me.'

'That may of course, be evidence for my contention,' said Mandy flippantly, 'but actually that wasn't my reason. She gets on my nerves.'

'Naturally,' said Derek. 'People like you and Ann want all the admiration to centre on yourselves.'

'Don't be nasty,' she said checking her rising anger. 'But I'd despise the admiration of that type.'

'Don't worry,' he replied, 'you're not likely to get it. As she says, the blue-stockings female quite overawes her.'

'Makes the poor little thing feel inferior,' lisped Mandy in mockery.

He sprang out of bed and began to dress.

'Bloody women,' he muttered, 'the minute you live with them they think they own you. I'll have you know I'll go out with whom I like.'

'Of course, darling,' she said, 'go where you like. Go to the devil if you so desire. I'm not stopping you. But have we got to have the fluffy little dears here?'

'It's my flat,' he said.

'In that case,' said Mandy icily. 'I can always leave.'

She turned her back and pulled the blankets around her neck. He stamped out of the door and down the landing. After he left, Mandy wept into her pillow. He was right. She was jealous and possessive. She began to feel ashamed of her demands. By the time he returned she had cleaned the flat from end to end and had cooked him a savoury dish of her own concoction. He brought a bottle of champagne with him. He looked at the savoury and she looked at the wine. They both began to laugh, then suddenly inexplicably she began to cry.

'Oh, Mandy, darling,' he said putting his arms around her. 'How could I? Of course it's your flat, too. You know, don't you?'

'Why do you think I cleaned the bloody thing?' she sobbed. 'I wouldn't have touched that awful mess for you alone.'

They spent so long kissing one another in the relief of reunion that the savoury was almost ruined.

After that she said nothing. Elaine continued to come on Friday evenings.

'I must conquer my puritanism,' she thought. 'It's me he loves, me. Not her. What does it matter if she amuses him a little?'

Yet when Ben Gregory asked her out for the evening she

went. They dined expensively and watched a professional show afterwards from the best seats. He bought her flowers, a tiny spray of brown, scented boronia. She liked his ease, his assurance, his lack of exhibitionism. She thoroughly enjoyed herself and came home rested. She was met inside the room by a Derek whose eyes blazed with anger.

'Where the hell have you been?' he asked. 'I've been waiting here for two hours.'

'Oh,' said Mandy, 'Elaine had to go home early, did she? What a pity.'

He caught her shoulders and shook her.

'You haven't answered me,' he said.

She looked at him cynically.

'Frankly, darling, it's not your business. As you've told me so often, we're free human beings.'

He dropped her sulkily.

'It was Ben, wasn't it?'

'And what if it were?' she asked. 'Still, my pet, I'll be generous. I'll relieve your anxiety. Yes, it was Ben.'

'The dirty double-crosser,' he said furiously. 'He's supposed to be my friend. He knows you're my girl.'

'Oh, no I'm not, Derek, my dear,' said Mandy pouring herself a drink. 'I'm not your girl. You don't own me. I merely live with you.'

He looked at her angrily.

'You think you're funny, don't you? Quoting me like that. But the circumstances are quite different. You know I don't take Elaine seriously.'

'Who says I take Ben seriously?' she asked.

'Ben's the sort of chap anyone takes seriously.'

'Why, Derek,' she laughed, 'you're jealous. Don't think I'm staying here if you go on like this. I'm going downstairs to make a cup of tea and a few bits of toast. I hope you'll be in a better mood when I return.'

Her wish was fulfilled. By the time she came upstairs again, he was still sulky but calmer. He drank the tea and ate the toast and by the time they went to bed seemed to have recovered his good humour.

'Mandy,' he said in the passion of embrace, 'you're mine, do you hear, mine.'

Mandy held him tight.

'Of course, darling,' she said, 'of course,' But she failed to give all of herself on that occasion. She found that she resented the one-way interpretation of freedom. And she did not take Ben seriously. He was only a friend.

Because she valued her relationship with Derek Mandy ceased to see Ben at night. She did occasionally lunch with him and like Elaine he continued to turn up on Friday evenings. Derek could hardly resent his presence. He himself had invited him. As Ben was leaving the army and returning to law there was no reason why he should not continue to be resident in Sydney and so present at Derek's on Fridays.

Yet the seed of discontent had been sown. Mandy found that the filth of her surroundings irritated more than in the past, and Derek was more inclined to grumble as conflict inevitably arose over both their activities and their views. When they had first become intimate, he had shrugged off her political opinions with the same cynical amusement as he had formerly treated her religious beliefs. But with the growing strains of familiarity they had begun to annoy him. On this matter, however, he was completely unable to influence her.

'How can you?' he raged, stalking up and down waving his undernourished arms 'How can you sit there and pretend to be a free-thinker, an individualist, a critical mind and support the present government?'

Mandy lay calmly on the bed, her feet sticking out from the alcove.

'The present government is no worse than any other in similar circumstances,' she said. 'You can't run a war without restriction.'

'That's no blasted reason for supporting restriction.'

'I'm not supporting restriction, I'm merely pointing out it's inevitable.'

'Only because turncoats like you desert the cause of freedom,' he glumbled.

'Don't tell me you think the U.A.P. sponsors freedom,' said Mandy cynically. 'Wealth exerts the greatest tyranny there is whenever it gets the chance.'

'Spare me the Marxist flapdoodle,' he said rudely. 'I know all about the wicked capitalist. Just as much as you.'

'I wonder,' said Mandy. 'But maybe you do. You were raised in their strongholds.'

'That's a lie,' he retorted. 'My parents were always swing-voters.'

'Speaking personally,' said Mandy, 'I wouldn't know. You've never favoured me with an introduction. I know the type. They change their allegiance with every cold wind that blows on their personal prosperity. People with convictions don't flutter from party to party like leaves in a gale.'

'Bunkum. You're just a bigoted, unthinking female. You vote Labour because your father voted Labour.'

'Maybe, but I learnt by personal experience the reason he voted Labour.'

'Our little slum-dweller,' he sneered.

'The usual attitude of our better-class suburbs to their less well endowed neighbours,' she retorted dryly. 'One of their perpetual illusions is that all industrial suburbs are slums.'

'Aren't they?'

'No, they're not.'

'Very well,' he said, 'continue to support untold regimentation on behalf of the silly poor.'

'Regimentation,' she snorted. 'Your own ideas are regimented hand and foot. If it comes to that neither of us are

free nor likely to be, but I still prefer to fight on the side of the underprivileged rather than the big battalions.'

'I fight on neither,' he answered.

'You kid yourself. Either explicitly or implicitly you're one or the other whether you like it or not.'

'"Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leadeth to salvation",' he mocked. 'You're so perpetually theological, my pet.'

'O.K.,' she said, 'I'm theological. But it's my business.'

In spite of their arguments they had the ability to make life sing. When they danced they forgot their feuds and became one. Against their friends they argued without rancour. They could appreciate the inanities of opponents without uttering a single word. Ben had this quality too and whether Derek liked it or not they formed in most alien gatherings a trio of emotional and mental co-operation. With Derek too, she found a new link with Caroline. They liked one another and week-ends were spent with the married pair, talking, laughing, playing. He shared with Caroline a real enjoyment of music and in the syncopated beat of jazz he came perfectly alive, his playing being the natural expression of his own flippant, self-conscious insecure nature.

If Mandy had remained with their union, in spite of difficulties, could have prospered. But Mandy found her old enemy, fatigue, was robbing them of their mutual joy. As wore on, their quarrels exhausted her emotionally and physically. Some week-ends she refused to dance, to jaunt from friend to friend but lay on the bed, worn out. Her weariness irritated him for he was defective in physical strength himself and hated the signs of it in another.

'Go away and leave me alone,' she would say and sooner or later she would hear with relief the door slam and his footsteps retreating down the rat-eaten staircase.

As spring wore on Mandy feared she was pregnant. The normal regularity of her body was disturbed and she could envisage no other reason. Under the strain of worry she became more irritable. Finally after one quarrel, more bitter than usual, she collapsed on the bed in a flood of tears.

'I think I'm going to have a baby,' she said.

For a second he looked at her open-mouthed, unbelieving.

'You can't,' he said. 'You can't be.'

'Why not?' she sobbed. 'I'm normal, aren't I?'

'But we've been so careful.'

'So, so careful,' she echoed bitterly. 'Love in blinkers. But even the careful have accidents.'

For a few seconds he said nothing, then:

'I'll see Bill to-night.'

'Bill?' said Mandy. 'What has Bill got to do with it?'

'He knows a good man. Doesn't charge much. Perfectly safe. Nothing to worry about. I'll get an appointment tomorrow. The sooner the better.'

For a second Mandy looked at him uncomprehending, then the gist of what he was saying finally dawned on her.

'Are you suggesting I have an abortion?' she said calmly, too calmly, for she could feel the pulses of anger beneath her skin.

'What else do you think I'm suggesting?' he asked.

'You could marry me,' she said coolly. 'Distasteful though the idea may be. Or alternatively I could sue you for maintenance or at a pinch provide for the baby all by myself.'

'What the hell are you getting at?' he demanded, his face white and framed by a damp ring of sweat beneath his hair line.

She laughed.

'I mean, my noble man, that I'm going to have the baby whether you marry me or not, and what is more I'm going to keep it.'

The seconds ticked away, then in rage he began to pace up and down, smashing his fist against the cupboard, kicking the chairs and the table.

'Don't talk nonsense,' he raved. 'You needn't think you can blackmail me like this. You knew when you came here I couldn't be tied up in marriage. The solution's simple. Hordes of girls like you have abortions.'

'But not me,' said Mandy.

Suddenly he changed his tone. Dropping on his knees he put his arms around her.

'I am a fool, Mandy. I ought to have realised you'd be scared. But there's no danger, honestly. This man's a real doctor.'

Mandy pushed him away.

'I don't care what he is,' she said. 'And it's a lie. There is a danger while the operation remains illegal. But you needn't think I'm scared of abortion. Even if it were safe I wouldn't do it. I just don't like killing, that's all.'

He looked at her incredulously.

'Why didn't you stay home where it's nice and secure? You're never going to be really free, are you? So you won't do it because it's a sin. Well, well, I might have known.'

She clenched her hands.

'I suppose that's one way of putting it. A sin. Very well, my dear rationalist, no doubt by your standards I'm quite inconsistent. Perhaps outside theology there is no moral vindication for my position. Your outlook is entirely reasonable. I congratulate you. Mine is not. But even if we leave out good and evil your attitude is destructive, destructive of life, of love, of everything. I loathe destruction, do you hear, loathe it. To me it is evil. I won't do it, not even to please you. I lived with you but I won't destroy the result of our loving, never.'

They did not speak again that day and at night he slept rolled in his sleeping-bag in the far corner of the room.

The next morning she went to see a doctor.

As she awaited his verdict, she noticed his face was grave.

'How long have you felt like this?' he asked.

'You mean the irregularity?' she asked.

'No,' he said, 'fatigued.'

She looked at the rain beating on the dreary windows of the Macquarie Street room. She smelt the stuffiness of the leather sofa, the barely definable odour of ether. It seemed to her then that she had been weary long, long years. She thought of Redwood, the white sands of North Queensland, the past four years of study. Physical fatigue was so much part of her life that she had learnt to take it for granted.

'I don't really know,' she answered. 'It's been so long.'

'I thought so. I'm sorry about this, my dear, but I'm afraid I'll have to operate. There's some sort of tumour or cyst present. Could have been there for years, perhaps all your life, but it's reached the stage where it's damaging other tissues.'

'I see,' she said slowly. 'You mean there's no question of pregnancy.'

'No,' he said. 'None at all. That's something I want you to realise. I think the damage is not irreparable but I'm not sure. It's just possible that you might never be able to have any children.'

'When will you know?' he asked quietly.

'I can't tell finally until I operate, I'm afraid. As I said, it will probably be all right but the growth is a big one and has been there some time. I think you ought to know what could be involved, just in case.'

She stepped out of the old building into the rain but she did not feel the splash of water on her face. Without putting up her umbrella, she walked through the downpour into

the botanical gardens. The spring display looked bedraggled, the dark green leaves of the Norfolk pines, the Morcton Bay figs adding to her depression. In the distance she saw a flowering peach which in sunshine would have been radiant with blossom. She longed to press her arms around it, lay her head on the slim boughs but it stood well back in a garden bed and trespass was not permitted.

Finally she sat down on one of the slatted wooden seats beneath a closely woven tropical tree and watched the rain fall drearily down on the harbour.

'Yesterday,' she thought, 'I wept because I feared I was pregnant. Today I weep because that baby might never exist, never.'

She felt glad she had resisted Derek's suggestion, glad she had not denied life to a child that had not been conceived. She felt weary and for a short space tired of living. She would have liked to pray but she could no longer convince herself there was any point. Finally she just sat, trying not to think, not to feel.

When she returned at last to the flat, Derek was already there. She noted with resignation, and some amusement at its unnecessary cause, that he was still sulking, the aura of silence spreading in disapproving waves from his down-cast mouth, dejected beard. She flung off her wet clothes and stepped into a dressing gown. As she laid out her drenched garments he seemed to notice for the first time her condition.

'You needn't think catching pneumonia will make me sorry for you,' he observed.

'I'm sure it wouldn't,' she replied dryly. 'But I'm glad you decided to speak. I can tell you the good news.'

'What good news? You've already confided that I'm going to be a father. How delightful! How conjugal!'

She twisted the belt of her gown between her fingers.

'You wrong me,' she said lightly. 'I can confirm that your freedom is unimpaired. Undisturbed by sounds of childish glee, you may continue on your bachelor ways.'

'Oh, Mandy, darling. Why didn't you say so before? Everything's all right then?'

'Everything's all right then,' she echoed. 'Nothing to worry about at all.'

He realised the tautness of her body, the tiny lines etched deeply along her forehead, beside her mouth. He sensed for a moment her utter weariness.

'Mandy,' he said gently, 'don't tell me you're sorry.'

She looked at him, dry-eyed, joyless, completely unattractive.

'No,' she said. 'Not sorry. How could anyone regret not asking a child to be born into this? Unwanted, unwanted, a symbol of bondage.'

'It wouldn't be appropriate,' he said.

'Appropriate,' she laughed. 'Such mild language. Appropriate. My God. It would be a bloody irretrievable error.'

He looked at her puzzled.

'In that case,' he said tartly, 'why don't you look a little happier?'

'Happy?' she queried. 'I'm riotously happy. I might even be safe for all time. If the operation is not successful I can live with impunity like a prostitute for the rest of my days.'

'Operation? What are you talking about, Mandy?'

So she told him, calmly, without emotion. He did not know what to say. He felt guilty at his own recent relief yet unable to share her distress. He felt she ought to cry but she didn't. He hated emotional crises, demands for sympathy, but he almost wished she would make them. He got up and began to put out knives and forks for a meal while she sat, still unspeaking, on the end of the bed.

'You'll be all right,' he said feebly

'Maybe,' she answered. 'I probably shall survive. A useless sterile female.'

He felt helpless. He was not sufficiently mature to cope with her problem. He could find no way to comfort her that was not trite or unfeeling. He chatted brightly throughout the meal but he felt she was not listening to him. She barely replied

That night he slept in the bag again.

And so it continued. Even though he returned to the bed, two nights on the hard floor being sufficient to cure his altruism, he seemed unable to contact her. Externally their relationship continued as before. They breakfasted, they went to work, they went to parties, they went to bed. but in a personal sense Mandy was not there.

On Friday, harassed by doubt, he said:

'We can skip the party this evening, Mandy.'

'Of course not,' she replied lightly. 'Don't let us skip anything. Even if we cancelled it someone would be bound to turn up and we should have to amuse them ourselves.'

'You feel up to it?' he said tentatively.

'Why shouldn't I?' she replied.

So they left for work as usual, he to hunt for drinks, she to scavenge for food.

As it happened, their friends turned up in numbers. Mandy found herself smiling and laughing, replying to the quips, the jokes, joining in the general fun. But within herself she felt nothing, no amusement, not even boredom.

When Ben came in she was glad, although she could not have said why, but she made no move to talk to him. The drinkers swung in and out, the cross-currents of movement and conversation eddied around them. Ben watched her a trifle anxiously.

'Why so pale and wan, fond one?' he asked.

'Me?' said Mandy. 'I'm not wan.'

'No? Do you realise that you've been standing motionless in that corner for the past five minutes. I doubt if you could even tell me what Max was singing.'

'You're right there. I haven't a clue. I've heard it all so often before, it no longer registers.'

He smiled quizzically.

'In fact, Mandy, the only thing you seem to be doing is drink.'

'What of it?' she said. 'Don't we all? If you want to be really helpful you can fill my glass for me.'

Suddenly the noise around them swelled, became intelligible.

'Mandy, Mandy, Mandy!' they were chanting. 'Wake up, Mandy. Give us the baptism'

'My God!' said Pete, 'she's as deaf as a post to-night.'

'Total immersion, my love,' called Derek. 'Mustn't keep your audience waiting. Let us expose the superstitions of the godly.'

Quietly she looked them over, then smiled at Derek.

'So,' she said, 'the ungodly want a performance. They want me to absolve their poor, guilty souls for them. They're so free they have to blaspheme every two minutes to prove it to themselves. Very well, I'll absolve you, all of you.'

She picked up a broom lying in the corner and smashed it across the table of glasses, the drinks huddled at the foot. They crashed and splintered breaking into thousands of fragments as she hit them again and again.

For a second there was dead silence.

'There,' she said addressing Derek only, 'my final performance. This is your baptism, not mine. Baptism into freedom.'

His eyes blazed. He was furious.

'How dare you!' he spluttered. 'How dare you!'

Elaine anxiously thrust herself between them.

'Take no notice of her, Derek darling. Take no notice.'

Derek thrust her aside and made a grab for Mandy, anger clouding his eyes, his beard quivering with rage. She pushed

him back with the broom. He was only slight after all, and he fell against the wall, trying unsuccessfully to regain his balance.

Mandy turned to Elaine.

'You'd better take over, my dear,' she said contemptuously. 'He's all yours. I've graduated.'

She turned and faced her stunned friends.

'Good-bye, everyone. Sorry about the mess.'

As the door closed after her, bedlam broke out. Ann and Max pulled Derek to his feet. Elaine took his arm.

'Are you all right, darling? That bitch might have killed you.'

'I'll kill her,' spluttered Derek. 'I'll kill her for this.'

Ben Gregory elbowed his way through the crowd. He stood face to face with Derek.

'No, you won't,' he said firmly. 'You know you have no right. Mandy did not turn on that show for nothing. You heard her, Derek. She's graduated. Why not accept the fact? I don't think she's coming back and I am quite sure she has perfectly good reasons. I've known you a long time, and the injured hero is quite out of character. Forget it and her.'

For a few seconds the two men looked at each other, one tall, quiet, the other small, angry. Then a smile hovered on Derek's lips, lit by the returning mockery in his eyes.

'You're quite right - the laugh's on me and I did ask for it. She's far too moral for me. Always was. Much more your type. Elaine is about my standard.'

She simpered, oblivious of his irony.

He turned back to the party.

'Sorry, folks,' he said. 'A little domestic upset. We'd better clear this mess, then scout around for a few more glasses and drinks.'

Ben Gregory quietly opened the door and slipped away.

When she left the house Mandy did not know where to go. Blindly she walked along the streets, past the shops half-lit in the brown-out. A couple of Americans moved out of the dim light to accost her, but, daunted by the cold anger in her eyes, hastily fell back into the shadows. She climbed the hill towards Hyde Park, then into the park itself. The dark pressed around her but she barely noticed it, nor the couples welded together in the shadow of the trees. Finally too tired to walk any more, she sat down in front of the Anzac memorial, the cold monument of stone towering behind her.

She put her head on her arms and began to cry in a wave of exhausted emotion.

'Here, take my hand,' said a voice and she felt two firm arms close around her. For a second terror gripped her then she realised the voice was familiar.

'What are you doing here?' she asked.

'Oh, nothing. Just taking an evening stroll. I was sick of the party too.'

She looked at him through wet lashes.

'Then you needn't bother to follow me,' she said.

He refused to be annoyed. He simply said.

'I think I do. I think you need someone desperately at the moment.'

He took her in his arms and nursed her, crooning over her as if she were a baby.

'This is ridiculous,' she thought, but the tears flowed and she no longer tried to stop them.

'Poor, poor Mandy,' he said. 'You know I'm glad you did that. No one ought to violate the great experiences of life. It's self-destructive, almost sacrilege.'

'What do you mean?' she asked from the fold of his coat.

'I mean,' he said, 'that in your heart of hearts you knew

that baptism was one of the transcendent moments of your life. That's why you tried to murder it. It didn't fit.'

'How did you know? Personal experience?'

'Definitely not!' He laughed. 'But I felt something was wrong the first night I saw you. Something off-key. You were trying too hard.'

'So you're religious too,' she half sneered. 'The beauty of belief.'

'You misunderstand me. I'm a natural non-believer. I doubt if I ever had a religious experience in my life. I rather regret that. I should think myself, however false the promises, the moments of spiritual attainment would be worth preserving.'

'You're right there,' she said softly, 'dead right. It was wonderful but also a trifle ludicrous. Even my holiest moments have been desecrated by mockery. Derek crystallized that feeling. I haven't been kowtowing to Derek's prejudices whatever you think. I was fighting something out with myself. I won't need to fight any more. I think tonight I've regained some of my spiritual stature even if I can never recover the convictions that created it.'

He smiled.

'Well, now that's settled we can go on. What's wrong between you and Derek? Do you love him?'

'I doubt if that's your business.'

'If we always minded our own business,' Ben said lightly, 'most of us would never get anywhere. I like you, Mandy. I feel you are my business. All right, you don't. But at least grant me this. I knew you were upset tonight even before you crashed the pillars of Gaza.'

She laughed.

'That's right. So you did. I suppose in a sense I do owe you an explanation, but you are barely more than a stranger.'

'I resent that. Party deserted. Town ransacked to find you, and you call me a stranger.'

'It was the baby,' she said quietly.

'Baby!' He checked the exclamation that rose to his lips.

'You're not pregnant, Mandy?'

'No. Oddly enough that's the real point. I was angry with him when I thought I was pregnant, but it was only after I found out the truth that I felt I couldn't bear to live with him again.'

'You're talking in riddles,' he said, holding her tighter. 'I think you'd better begin at the beginning.'

So she did. Right at the beginning. Starting with Keith. Ending with her present unhappiness.

He was silent when she finished. Like Derek he did not know what to say, but unlike Derek he understood the full measure of her distress.

'I said I could be a perfect prostitute. And he said nothing. I felt he might even agree, be glad.'

'I think you wrong him there,' he answered. 'For one thing he would not envisage living with you forever. I think he was probably shocked at the possible consequences, but you were outside his emotional range. The problem for you belonged to that part of you he has no desire to share. There was no way he could make it his problem too, not unless he faced a lot of issues he doesn't want to face.'

• 'Such as?'

'Marriage, responsibility productive love.'

She smiled.

'Poor old Derek. Such roles wouldn't suit him. Let's leave him as he is.'

'I don't think we'll have any choice in the matter,' he returned.

She laughed, amused for the moment at the picture of

Derek comfortably married, respectable, but only for a moment. He felt her mood of depression return.

'But what happens to me now?' she said. 'I can't go backwards.'

'Then go forward,' he answered. 'Like your precious Christian soldier. A little experience in life never hurt anyone. You fell for Derek because you wanted to be free and because you felt guilty about Keith.'

'I ought to have felt guilty,' she replied. 'I treated him badly.'

'I don't see that,' he answered. 'You didn't lie with him because you didn't love him and you knew he would interpret it to be a great deal beyond kindness on your part. Your action was perfectly logical and, I think, right.'

'How comforting,' she said ironically. 'He appealed to me to help him find a wider, freer life and I sent him away to die with nothing but patriotism and God to comfort him. I was such a noble, moral little female.'

'Well that was what he wanted, surely,' said Ben impatiently. 'I can't see that Keith had any kick coming if you lived up to his demands.'

'Perhaps you're right,' she said wearily, 'but I don't see that it's going to help me now.'

'There's only one thing to do now. Mandy. Go home.'

'I have no home,' she said.

'Oh God!' he answered. 'None at all?'

'I have sisters but no home in the strict sense. Nena's at Coff's, Catriona lives in Queensland, Lyndon shares a flat and Caroline is married.'

'Does she live in Sydney?'

'Yes.'

'Then go and stay with her. What's her husband like?'

'Nice,' said Mandy, 'but he's in the navy. He happens to be away at the moment. I don't know if Caroline will

want to be bothered with me. My family is always so busy and . . .'

'Stop being stupid,' he interrupted angrily, 'and proud. Don't you like them?'

'I love them,' she said simply, 'but I have no right to ask them to shoulder my burdens.'

'Then do it without a right. Personally I think they'd be hurt if you failed to let them know about this.'

'Very well,' she said meekly. 'I'll write to all of them. In fact I'll go up to Caroline's after work tomorrow. But what about tonight?'

'You could come to my place,' he said. 'I have a room at the Cross. No one would mind.'

She looked at him doubtfully.

He put back his head and roared laughing.

'And I'm not, my dear, aiming to step into Derek's shoes just yet. My suggestion is honourable.'

She blushed to think he had read her thoughts.

'I'll come,' she said.

He gave her the bed and slept himself on a camp stretcher beside the kitchen table. He lent her a pair of his pyjamas and they both laughed as she waded forward with the legs dangling a good nine inches below her ankle.

'You look cute,' he said.

He was tempted to kiss her but he did not. Instead he knelt down and tucked up the ends into a pair of respectable looking cuffs. Then picking her up, he threw her gently into the bed and tucked her in.

She fell asleep fast. She was awakened by the smell of frying bacon and coffee and before she fully recollected her surroundings, she was sitting propped up in bed with the bacon in front of her.

He raised his coffee cup.

'To our first breakfast.'

She went back to Derek's after work to pack her belongings. At first she was nervous, remembering his anger the previous evening. To her relief he greeted her as usual.

'Nice to see you, my pet. Come to collect, I suppose.'

She smiled at him trying not to cry.

'How did you know?'

'Give me credit for some artistic sense,' he said lightly.

'I recognise a curtain when I see one.'

She laughed.

'That's what I like about you. You're so adaptable.'

'Within limits,' he added.

She looked at him gravely.

'That is true,' she said.

It did not take her long to push her few belongings into a suitcase.

'Where are you going?' he asked.

'Caroline's,' she answered.

'Ben is so honourable,' he mocked. 'That's what the army did for him.'

For a second she was angry, then she caught his eye and laughed. She moved to the door.

'Put down that case and come here,' he ordered.

She turned around.

He took her in his arms and kissed her hard.

'Good luck, my Mandy. I love you more than I have ever loved anyone barring myself. I hope everything turns out all right. Forgive me for not being a hero.'

Tenderly she kissed him back.

'There's no reason why you should be,' she replied. 'You gave me what I wanted. It's been a wonderful year and I don't regret it.'

She picked up her case and hurried down the stairs for the last time.

He did not call her back.

While she was in hospital they all came to see her. Nena, Lyndon, Catriona, Caroline left their various habitats and converged on her bed. She was grateful. For the first day or two, she hovered semi-conscious on the edges of pain not caring about anything in particular. It seemed natural to her that the family was there. Natural and right.

The second day she saw the doctor. One look at his calm face reassured her, but she still needed to hear the good news verbally.

'You're quite sure it's all right?' she asked.

'Quite sure,' he grinned. 'As long as you don't mind being a trifle lopsided inside I can assure you that you're as good a model as any other. In fact,' he added seriously, 'you're a very lucky girl.'

'You're a nice man,' she responded and, semi-drugged, fell promptly asleep.

Ben did not come to see her until she was capable of enjoying company. As his tall figure led the rush through the swinging door, her heart lifted with pleasure and she realised just how much she liked him, how essentially dependable he was. There was no need to talk unless she felt like it. He was content to sit beside her, his fingers twined in hers, and say nothing.

At the end of the first week, to her delight, the entire gang arrived, motley, untidy, half-shaven, a tonic for the frigid antiseptic atmosphere of the clean beyond all cleanliness ward. Max, Pete, Jane, Ann, two or three others but not Derek. She stifled her disappointment and did her best to concentrate on her guests. She soon discovered that the

entertainment extended well beyond her own bed, for they made no attempt to lower their voices or subdue their usual colourful personalities.

'Who did that?' roared Pete as a flash of lightning jagged across the room. He turned and pointed an accusing finger at the old lady in the bed opposite to Mandy with such genuine amazement in his voice and bearing that all four patients dissolved in peals of laughter.

'Are you up to Scotch yet?' asked Max and produced a bottle from his overcoat pocket. 'I had to barter my soul to get this for you. A nasty old man with a nose for money had it hidden at the back of his shelves. I even told him you were dying, but it had no effect. The only lure was filthy lucre and plenty of it.'

Mandy laughed.

'I don't think matron would appreciate it, at least not in the ward. We aren't even permitted to smoke.'

The old lady opposite looked at them over the frilly edge of her old-fashioned bed jacket.

'She'd appreciate it, young man,' she said dryly. 'So much in fact that Mandy would never see it again.'

Max grinned at her.

'What do you advise?' he asked.

'Either drink it now, which is risky,' said the old lady, 'or take it with you.'

'What a shame,' said Pete.

'I could mind it until Mandy's out of hospital,' said Ben eagerly.

'No you don't,' said Max, 'I can guard it myself, thank you.'

Laughing, he put it back in the pocket whence it came. Turning to the old lady he bowed low.

'And thank you, ma'am, for your good advice. You'll have to come to one of our parties when you're better. You'd be a riot.'

The old lady beamed with pleasure and took out her woman's magazine.

By the time the visiting hour ended Mandy had laughed so much that her stitches hurt. It was as well for her future comfort that they could not stay longer.

Ben waited after the others left, risking a brisk reprimand from the stiffly starched trainee nurse who swept into the ward each evening determined to steer all recalcitrant visitors out, quick march.

'By the way, Mandy,' he said casually. 'Derek rang me this afternoon. He wanted to know if you were all right and he told me to tell you he's glad everything turned out O.K.'

The vague feeling of depression lifted from Mandy's mind

'Were those his exact words?' she asked.

'You're sure you want it literally?' he queried dubiously

'Yes, please.'

'Well to quote exactly. "Tell Mandy I'm glad to hear she has no future as a prostitute. Elaine is adequate in bed but pretty dumb otherwise".'

He watched her anxiously and was relieved to see the smile light her eyes.

'That sounds more like him,' she said. 'I'm glad he rang even if he doesn't come to see me.'

He bent over and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

'Good night, Mandy.'

• 'Good night, Ben. You're a darling

The starched nurse marched into the room clutching an armful of bed pans. Ben beat a hasty retreat.

For her convalescence, Catriona suggested she come and stay with her. Bob now had a surgery in a Brisbane suburb and the journey would not overtire her provided she had a short rest with Caroline for a week or two.

By the time she was ready to leave for the north Mandy

felt a renewed flow of life in her veins. Living was an adventure after all. Catriona travelled with her. They were met at Brisbane by Bob and the children. Mandy was surprised to see how much they had grown, for the war had made visits to Sydney very infrequent. She experienced for the first time the sense of passing years created by the growth of the young.

'I must have been a little girl when I came up before. I'm getting old; Nena and Catriona are middle-aged.'

Bob was out of the forces, having received his discharge after a severe bout of pneumonia. They now lived in a lovely area overlooking the river. The gums at this point were still luxuriant and the houses rose in ascending heights above the river bank.

'We're a bit far from the city,' said Bob, 'but this place is going to grow after the war. You wait and see.'

Being on the verge of summer it was hot, but Mandy did not mind. She looked at her brother-in-law and wondered how he had contrived to grow so much fatter in the semi-tropical climate. Now on the edge of forty, he had filled out. His fair curls were thinning fast, and his general appearance was coarser, his nose redder. He seemed assured, no longer a struggling country dentist but a suburban professional man. Catriona, too, was fatter. No need now to strive for a matronly appearance. She had it unaided. Ostensibly satisfied with life, her mouth drooped tentatively into little lines of discontent, grooves of unfulfilled purpose.

Their home was modern and flyproofed. No extraneous vermin here. The stray cockroach received short shrift.

'There he goes,' yelled the children at the betraying scuffle in the back of the cupboard and everyone descended, brandishing brooms and sticks until the unfortunate creature was exterminated.

'You have to be careful in this climate,' said Catriona. 'They breed like fleas in Sydney and they're so dirty too.'

'I guess they are,' laughed Mandy. 'But don't you ever feel just the tiniest bit sorry for the cockroach, Catriona?'

'No, I don't,' she said firmly. 'They're filthy brutes.'

Mandy uttered a prayer of thankfulness that Catriona had never visited the L-shaped room and the communal kitchen.

While the family attended the Sunday service in the tiny Anglican Church, Mandy rested or pottered around the garden. She was intrigued by the hothouse of exotic plants, the sumptuous, bilious salmon-pink leaves, the scarlet spots of the more exciting specimens. Way in the distance below her, the river wound happily on its way. In the distance, she thought she could glimpse Brisbane itself, but it may have been a mirage fashioned by the haze that the heat spread over the landscape. She was disturbed by a click of the garden gate and even more disturbed to see Ben striding up the garden path, coat slung across his arm. For a second she thought she was suffering from illusion in the sun-drenched garden, then, at the obvious substantiality of the vision, she felt an absurd desire to run away, to escape the implication of his presence, to remain for the rest of time nothing more than Catriona's baby sister enclosed in a nice, neutral, unemotional universe. Instead she left her chair in the shade of the huge veranda and went to meet him. He laughed at the confusion in her face, interpreting it as surprise, then he kissed her. With the kiss she felt her being come to life again, her heart quicken at the prospect of renewed love.

'My, it's good to see you again, Mandy,' he said, dragging his mouth from hers. 'The past week has been a desert without the sight of you.'

'It's good to see you, too,' she answered lightly, holding

'him at arm's length, studying the dark irregular features, the patchwork eyes. 'But how?'

'Ways and means,' he laughed. 'I persuaded my firm to find me an urgent job in Brisbane for this week. So, here I am.'

'Barely real,' she murmured.

'Totally real,' he answered and the arms that closed around her were certainly not dream arms.

'What will Catriona say?' asked Mandy.

'"This is a surprise. How nice to see you." Don't forget I've already met Catriona. You know if she were ten years younger I could fall for her. Lovely skin, lovely eyes.'

'Men always did,' said Mandy sadly. 'I seem to remember the constant stream of young men left bleeding by the wayside.'

An hour later, Catriona and family returned from church along the dusty road. Petrol was short, so they did all local trips on foot. Ben and Mandy walked down the road to meet them, giving Catriona time thereby to adjust herself to the new arrival.

'This is a surprise,' she said extending her hand with her most charming smile, 'but it's awfully nice to see you.'

'One word out,' murmured Mandy in Ben's ear.

Bob and the children were introduced and they all returned to the house for dinner, Ben readily accepting the invitation which Catriona naturally offered him.

'Where are you staying?' asked Bob.

'Hotel in Queen Street,' said Ben. 'It's handy for business. But I hope to have a few spare hours,' he added with a smile.

'Not much time to spare these days,' said Bob, pouring a sherry for all of them. 'But I suppose the war will end one day and we can all relax and be happy again.'

Ben sipped his drink.

'Were we happy then, before the war?' he asked.

'My God,' said Bob, slapping his leg, 'I don't know. Perhaps we weren't. Life was pretty tame. Still we used to have quite a good time, didn't we, Mandy?'

'I remember it as a joyous round of cards and frivolity,' she said dryly. She smiled at him. 'But you don't look too unhappy now.'

'That's all you know,' said Catriona. 'Life is nothing but work, work, work. We've spent years and years trying to get on and where does all the money go? To the government. Poor Bob never has an hour to himself and nothing to show for it.'

Mandy looked around the comfortably furnished room, the elegant house, but decided to say nothing. Bob, however caught the glint in her eye.

'I suppose we can't guzzle, he said uneasily. 'Plenty of young fellows are dead.'

He turned to Ben.

'I believe you were in the Pacific for a time?'

'Yes,' said Ben shortly, 'I was. No income tax problems there.'

'Would have liked to have gone away myself,' said Bob wistfully. 'But they kept me on the mainland; North Queensland, you know.'

'Be grateful,' said Ben and Mandy sensed he wished to drop the subject.

Catriona bustled out to prepare the meal, so Mandy went with her, leaving Ben to hear the tale of Bob's war experiences. She was irritated to note that Catriona's mind ran on matrimony.

'Is he a good lawyer, Mandy?'

'I wouldn't know.'

'There's money in law if you have brains.'

'I don't know if Ben's very interested in money.'

'Of course he is,' said Catriona firmly. 'Any young man

'with a profession and the possibility of marriage thinks of the money angle.'

'You forget,' said Mandy; 'there's a war on. Values aren't the same any more. Maybe Ben is interested in money, but I've never seen any sign of it and it doesn't concern me anyway.'

'War or no,' said Catriona, 'life remains basically the same. He looks serious to me. Why else has he come all this way, just to see you?'

Mandy fiddled with a lettuce leaf.

'His firm sent him.'

'Mmm,' said Catriona but she managed to impregnate the sound with a wealth of innuendo.

Mandy stabbed at a tomato.

'For heaven's sake, Catriona, stop marrying me off.'

'Why not? You're young and marriageable. What do you want out of life if you don't want to marry?'

Mandy nearly replied, 'A life of free love, untrammelled by responsibility' simply to see the shocked look on Catriona's face, who believed her a virgin, but she knew from her own experience that she would be lying and there was, finally, no point in lying.

'I wish I knew sometimes,' she answered.

'Well, Ben's a nice young man and I hope you'll remember it.'

'Like Bob, eh?' said Mandy laughing. 'But he might turn out like Reg. Charm can be fatal.'

Catriona pressed her lips together.

'Reg was all right,' she said. 'Or he would have been if life had given him a fair deal.'

'My dear girl,' said Mandy, 'don't deceive yourself. Reg was Reg. He had the soul of an artist but he never found a canvas quite big enough.'

'I guess not,' said Catriona. 'Anyway Bob's all right.'

'Good and safe,' said Mandy.

'What's wrong with that?' said Catriona, pricking.

'Nothing at all,' said Mandy, picking up the plate and carrying it to the dining table. 'According to you, the ultimate aim of life. If only you could forget the swings and the roundabouts, the rainbow-coloured existence that was after all only a mirage.'

'Talk sense,' said Catriona sharply, so Mandy thankfully changed the subject by calling the others to dine.

The following Saturday, Ben took her out for the day before returning to Sydney.

'Let's go down the coast,' he said. 'There are some nice beaches between Southport and the border, as yet barely discovered by the common herd.'

On the edge of Southport he hired a canoe, and clad only in their swimming costumes they paddled out across the sunny expanse of water. Over the sand hills they could hear the roar of the surf, soporific in its regular rhythm.

Across the paddles he watched her, tracing in his mind the fall of her lashes, the shape of her tiny face. With the light hiding in her hair, she was almost beautiful.

'Mandy,' he said, 'a couple of months ago I asked you a question. You didn't answer it.'

'Oh.'

'Would you answer it now?'

'What was it?'

'I asked you if you loved Derek. You replied it was your business.'

'It still is.'

'I know. Your business entirely. But I'd like you to answer it.'

Mandy dipped her hand into the water bubbling around them.

'It's not easy to think in a canoe,' she said. 'Let's land.'

He ran the prow on to the beach. She said nothing. As it was hot they lay in the water on the edges of the sand side by side.

'Well, Mandy?'

'I don't know, Ben. It's not that I don't want to answer. I honestly don't know. You see, I don't think I could know anybody as intimately as Derek and not love him. At the same time, I hated him. If I lived with him again I should continue to hate him off and on.'

'Love and hate,' she thought. 'Surely that's the crux of the problem. The need to love and the eternal resentment at intrusion into self. Lyndon, Reg. Nena. I loved and hated all of them.'

Ben kicked his legs in the clear water and watched the bright, shining column rise above his body.

'I think I understand,' he said. For a few seconds he trickled the water through his fingers saying nothing. Finally he looked at her as if he could find the truth without words at the bottom of her eyes.

'The point is this, Mandy. Could you love me too or would I always be a poor substitute for Derek?'

'No, not that,' said Mandy. 'I'm certain there. You're you and my feelings for you are not graded by my feelings for Derek. One bit of me will always miss him. Somewhere our souls harmonised, but I want more from life than Derek's sort of love. That was why I left him.'

'Do you think I could give you what you want, Mandy?'

She rolled out of the water and lay in the sun, the sand clinging in white-black grains to her body.

This time she searched his eyes.

'Are you asking me to live with you, Ben?'

'No,' he said dryly. 'I'm asking you to marry me.'

Mandy was silent. Her body lay still, unresponsive in the sun, but her mind raced frantically from thought to thought.

In spite of Catriona she was not really prepared for a proposal of marriage. In spite of his apparent gallantry she knew he had been one of Derek's group. He too had made love in small flats, renounced marriage as a curtailment of freedom. Derek had told her some of their previous adventures together. Why then was he asking her to marry him? He knew about her affaire with Derek. Was he sorry for her then? There was no pity there. Yet obstinately, persistently, she verbally taunted him in spite of her own mental recognition of the falsity of her charge.

'You don't have to make an honest woman of me.'

He winced.

'If I thought you weren't honest,' he said slowly, 'I shouldn't be asking you to marry me. I love you, Mandy, partly because you are honest, too honest to renounce all your past faiths and loyalties at the instigation of your lover. Don't you understand, I love you in the way that wants to share a lifetime with you. But I don't want to share with Derek too.'

She felt humbled.

'Derek doesn't count,' she answered. 'Not in those terms. He made that quite clear. But I don't want to be pitied. You don't have to treat me differently from all the others in your past.'

'Blast you!' he said. 'And blast Derek! I'm not pitying you. Why the hell should I? It was to avoid such stupidity on your part that I didn't ask you to marry me six weeks ago. I knew I loved you the moment Derek's glasses lay in ruins on the floor. Your surgeon's verdict, thank God, has cleared me of the imputation of charity.'

She found she was crying.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'You're quite right. I'm making you a moral monster. I assume if you and me ever wanted to live with me you'd say so.'

'Exactly. I'd say so. I don't want an affaire with you, Mandy. I want to marry you.'

She continued to cry to hide her confusion. Here was a refuge from loneliness, a secure love to replace her lost family. She found his company satisfying, restful. And he loved her. She had never been so sure of love. Reg loved Catriona, Nena loved Lyndon, Lyndon loved Caroline and Ann had died. She knew she would be unable to refuse him, yet the independent self struggled against his desire. She did not want to become domesticated. She was still young. All her youth had been lived in the shadow of war. There were things she wanted to do, ambitions still unfulfilled.

'I'm not sure I want to marry just yet,' she said. 'I've dreamt of going abroad, of studying overseas. They'll renew the travelling scholarships once the war ends. A married woman hasn't a chance. You want marriage but a temporary affair might suit me better. After all, why not?'

'No, Mandy,' he said. 'I'm not going to live with you. You gave the reason yourself. You love and hate too deeply. Promiscuity would be a denial of the best things in you. Transitory affairs are for those who take them lightly. You don't. I don't want you to smash my glasses and walk out in six months.'

'You want to bind me for life,' she said, almost scornfully.

He felt a moment's desire to shake her.

'My God,' he said, 'you're exasperating. God alone knows marriage is not death. I know you're intelligent but do you really desire a great career at the expense of being a woman? Answer me, Mandy. Do you?'

'I don't know,' she said.

'Do you really swallow that drivel about love being free in attics and bondage in a home? After all, ninety-nine per cent of your precious free lovers marry in time. Have you ever asked why? If you have the guts you'll achieve things

anyway. But I'm not offering you a nice safe refuge where you can pretend to accept the conditions of womanhood and yet cheat all along the line.'

She put her hand over his.

'Don't get angry, Ben. There are plenty of men who do mean servitude by marriage, who do resent their wives' independent achievements. Don't you see, that was Derek's attraction. He made no demands. He liked me as I was.'

'No, he didn't,' said Ben. 'He wanted you to deny at least half your womanhood, to live perpetually in a way that did not interfere with a single one of his own personal activities.'

He took her by the shoulders and thrust his face close to hers.

'Have I given you any reason, my dear, to think I want to transform you into a passive ninnv? Do you think marriage means no loss of freedom to a man? Love is a tyranny. If you don't like it, don't love.'

She stood up and began to rub herself down.

'I do want love, Ben, and I do know that my freedom is not the only one infringed by its demands. But I have to be sure we really desire this thing. Both of us.'

He smiled ruefully.

'Of course. You love to be certain, don't you, Mandy? But can one ever be absolutely sure in advance. Any relationship has its dangers. All I can say is I love you now, I want to marry you. I think I shall always love you.'

She hugged the towel around her shoulders and looked across the water. The clear air spun around her warm yet alive melting to a haze in the far distance. She felt a new sense of exhilaration. She looked at his long brown legs, long-fingered sensitive hands, his over-long mouth, his dark ruffled hair. She felt her own desire pulse through her and she knew with certainty that she could not bear to lose him

whatever the cost. She knelt down on the sand beside him and folded her arms around him.

'I'll marry you, Ben,' she said softly. 'If you really want me. I do know I cannot bear the thought of your perpetual absence.'

His arms in turn closed around her, his lips found hers and she tasted the salt of the sea. It seemed to her that it was the salt of his being and she sucked in with it a sense of security deeper than any she had ever known.

They were married quietly without fuss three months later, in a church.

'I hope you don't mind, Ben,' said Mandy anxiously.

'Not at all,' he said. 'My religion is the Catriona type. I don't really believe anything very much but I don't object to making the necessary observances. I do not oppose church marriage although I should favour a register office left to myself. It's perfectly legal and simple.'

'That's the point,' said Mandy.

Ben laughed, then cupped her chin in his hand.

'I expected this,' he said. 'But tell me, Mandy, why you, who have abjured your faith, wish to have its approval for your marriage.'

Mandy twisted her hands.

'It's a matter of sanctity,' she murmured softly. 'If it were Derek I shouldn't even ask. With him it would be sacrilege, but I thought you'd understand.'

'I do,' he said. 'But I want to hear your reasons all the same.'

'To the law,' said Mandy, marriage is a contract. The personal overtones are not its concern. A formality to be completed as quickly as possible. Bare rooms. Awkward guests and public servants. No music.'

Ben smiled.

'I can understand that,' he said. 'Music does create an emotional atmosphere.'

'And a feeling of God,' added Mandy 'Consecration.'

Ben watched her closely.

'The approval of a God you don't believe in.'

'No,' she protested. 'That's not fair. I'm not asking for the approval of a bourgeois God of hypocrisy. I mean the sense of God. The consciousness of a world of values. Eternal love. The vision of the Holy Grail.' She laughed. 'But I fear, alas, there is no Grail for the married. It requires complete single-minded dedication. I often wish I had it.'

Ben sighed.

'I begin to see why you could get along with Keith. Well, my dear, religious free thinker, you shall have your church and your blessing.'

'Thank you,' said Mandy and kissed him.

It was a busy time. Ben's flat was far too small for two people, so they began the almost impossible task of wresting some sort of adequate dwelling place out of the Sydney of 1945. Mandy and Ben wrote letters, answered ads, advertised themselves. They looked at poky rooms in old two storied houses, inspected alcoves, barely curtained off from other flat dwellers.

'You have no children of course,' postulated every hard-faced house owner seeking to profit by the necessity of the young.

'No, we have no children,' they confirmed anxiously.

Finally they found two self-contained rooms in a crowded centre between Bondi and Paddington. It smelt of tenants and urine from the unwashed lavatory perched beneath the kitchen ventilator, but life with Derek had helped to neutralise Mandy's sense of smell. It was in itself clean, it had its own gas stove, its own sink, its own cupboards. A long water or gas pipe ran well above Mandy's head across the back wall of the kitchen. Ben with a whoop of delight ranged his pipes along one end of it and ran up a tiny book shelf to perch on the other.

'Well out of the little woman's reach,' he chortled.

Mandy threw the carrot she was peeling at his closely

cropped head. Three steps led from the kitchen to the bedroom.

'For our guests,' she laughed, 'when they wish to rest their weary limbs or keep out of the way of the cook.'

The bedroom was dominated by the high squeaky double bed. There was no place to relax, save it, no garden, no veranda, no spare room. Even the hall outside the door was occupied. The landlady had finally succumbed to the ultimate temptation of yet another thirty-five shillings per week by renting her own bedroom and taking up residence in a screened portion of the broad hallway.

If they wanted to rest, they went to bed, but to the newly married that did not seem such an unenviable fate. If they tired of the four walls, the whole city was at their disposal. Even at night the Junction teemed with life, the press and throb of humanity which Mandy cherished. If they were lonely the constant clatter of the double-carriaged footboard trams shared their thoughts. If they yearned for a garden, all Centennial Park lay at their door.

In the first few months Mandy settled down to learning more about Ben. Unlike Derek he shared her political views, yet she was not content. She was forever teasing him, worrying over the whys and wherefores like a terrier with a recalcitrant bone.

'I don't understand,' she said, perched in her dressing gown on the kitchen steps while Ben fried sausages for breakfast, 'I don't understand why you vote Labour.'

'An odd comment,' said Ben struggling with a bursting skin, 'from a confirmed Left-wing voter.'

'You know what I mean,' she said. 'It's part of my tradition, but you were reared like Derek.'

'We did have different parents,' he observed dryly. 'As a matter of fact my old man votes Labour.'

'But he's such a pukka sahib,' laughed Mandy. 'And your

mother somehow doesn't suggest the working front. Private schools, private hospitals.'

'I did begin at a high school,' said Ben. 'Actually my education was carried out on a perfect fifty-fifty basis, a little of the common herd, a dash of the élite. You can't blame a person for making sure they're doing the right thing.'

'Like a girl I knew at Redwood,' said Mandy thoughtfully. 'Her mother had her christened and baptised just in case the other party was right after all.'

Ben laughed.

'I don't think Dad really comes in that category. What you overlook, Mandy darling, is the possible double front to Left-wing politics.'

'Yes?' she queried.

'You can vote with the Left because you believe the worker in his own right ought to have a say in government, the means of participation, a share of the wealth of the State, the facilities to fight for rights. That is your sort. It borders on religion. You support the underprivileged for their own sake. You even believe in conflict, in a working class contribution to society, but the other group, of which my old man is one, votes Labour because he believes that his own class, outlook, way of life is the utterly desirable one. He is aiming to raise the worker to his own level. He believes it to be his duty to the poor dear things.'

'The bloody nerve of him,' said Mandy.

Ben tossed the sausages on to a plate.

'Eat that and shut up,' he said. 'It's time you learnt to tolerate the views of others and not to despise your own Right-wing support. Are any of us solid bourgeoisie quite guiltless of simple condescension when it comes to a show-down?'

Mandy chewed thoughtfully.

'Well he's a nice-mannered old gentleman,' she conceded, 'but I still reckon it's his sort that are really intolerant. And I still don't see now they come to vote Labour in the first place.'

Ben stuffed a sausage into her mouth.

'If you must pursue the topic,' he said, 'for the simple reason that his father was a die-hard Conservative. My old man always did the opposite wherever possible.'

Mandy swallowed hard.

'I understand that,' she said.

In general she found the early months of her marriage a pleasant period. Ben was comfortable, considerate. They liked the same literature and music. They could lie on the bed and yarn for hours about Thomas Wolfe, a fetish with both of them that year, or argue about the respective merits of English and French literature. Like Keith he enjoyed walking, and with a cry of delight she resumed her interest in hiking, an activity abandoned previously out of deference to Derek who saw no reason ever to leave the city area. Week-ends were spent trekking through the country south of Sydney. They explored National Park from end to end, skidding down the steep cliff faces of the southern beaches, sleeping with the dew. And if their passion lacked both the fire and bitterness that she had experienced with Derek it was at least more restful. It was only when her own turbulent soul wished to lash out into new fields, new adventures, that she felt irritated by his slow measured consideration of all problems, his tolerant carefulness in all his decisions. As he strode up and down their little room expounding thoughtfully the respective merits of French and English poetry, she would in these moods exclaim harshly, knowing that his own preference was for the French.

'For God's sake, stop being so damned pompous. Form, form, form. Any clod can produce perfect form if he takes

'enough pains. French poetry lacks passion, it rarely soars. They are prose writers, not poets. Basically they're as prosy as hell.'

Derek would have fought back, abused her own prejudices, as heated as herself, but not Ben. He merely pointed out slowly and judiciously the arguments against her point of view. It occasionally irritated her that her own bursts of temper had no power to ruffle him. Yet she prized his equanimity, the sense of security that it created. She had always hoped to escape the tempests so frequent in her own family. Or had she? It was true he treated her like a queen, made it easy for her to continue her own reading, pursue her own studies. Yet however hard she tried she could never dominate him. Beneath his acquiescent exterior, he was quite obstinate in the pursuit of his own ends. Quietly, without fuss, he went his own way, formulated his own views, uninfluenced by her.

In September that year, the war finally ended. The news of the Japanese surrender came while Mandy was at work. Immediately the whole office went mad. They ransacked the cupboards for paper and tore into shreds the precious coloured sheets that the Commonwealth purchased with the taxpayer's money. They leant out of windows above Martin Place and dropped their rainbow-hued bundles of litter into the streets. The air above the famous roadway was a cloud of whirling paper, twisting, spiralling, floating to earth, where it settled on the pavements in brightly coloured heaps. Amidst the paper, crowds swarmed, arms linked together, jostling, pushing, singing, shouting. The sirens of the trucks and cars blared as hordes of office workers clambered on their backs for a triumphant, snail-like ride up and down Pitt Street.

Work ceased for the day, the juniors hastily seizing their belongings, desirous only of joining the anonymous body of

merrymakers below. Mandy looked down on the revellers and felt isolated.

'I'll wait here,' she thought. 'Ben will come for me when he can.'

In the half-empty office she felt depressed.

'I ought to rejoice,' she thought. 'This is peace. The war is over.'

But it had been war so long, ever since she left school, that, for the moment, the end of hostilities made no real impact on her consciousness. She remembered Keith, Ben Allen who were dead, and all the other slaughtered members of her own generation.

'We won,' she thought. 'That is what they died for. This is the victory,' and she tried to stop her mind encompassing only the mushroom-shaped cloud and the melted children of Hiroshima.

Is this our new creation?' she wondered. A peace founded on the most destructive weapon yet devised. Where does it end? And in the moment of victory her sympathies swung over to Grandma Vicky who had always been so sure that those who lived by the sword would die by it. She looked again at the merrymaking crowd, the flimsy, temporary halo of paper and felt the triumph of mankind had no more permanence than this.

She was awakened from her reverie by Ben, wild, excited, full of life. He reached across her desk, caught her waist between his hands and lifted her above his head.

'It's over, Mandy. At last. Come on, let's celebrate. What are we waiting for?'

'It's not over,' she thought. 'It's only just beginning,' but she did not say it.

Instead she laughed, forced him to put her down, then taking his hand went out to become part of a rejoicing city.

' Once in the crowd she forgot her depression and joined in the spirit of carnival. Later she was to remember it as the most hazy afternoon she ever spent. She remembered throwing flowers from the back of someone's lorry, being kissed by a soldier and a couple of sailors, drinking beer with strangers in a hotel somewhere between the city and the Cross, strolling around the Domain after dark with hundreds and thousands of other citizens who were hoping to see lights on the harbour and finally eating supper with Ben at Rushcutter's Bay somewhere about midnight. He bought steaks to celebrate and coaxed a bottle of champagne out of a reluctant proprietor. The first fervour of excitement had gone but he was still exhilarated at the thought of peace.

He took a long sip, then raised his glass to hers.

'To the future,' he said. 'To life that can be lived again, just how we like it.'

Mandy dutifully responded.

'Oh, Mandy,' he said, clasping her hands, 'just think of it. No more army, no more manpower, regimented lives. Our generation is at last free to enjoy its youth.'

She smiled at his enthusiasm, yet felt a chill of apprehension. It was a dual future that Ben was envisaging, but what exactly would her role be? She liked their present comfortable, unthinking existence. In peace she suspected the major role would undoubtedly be his.

In a couple of months Lyndon left for Europe to work for the organisation responsible for the homeless children of the world. They all went to the wharf to see her off, Caroline, who now had a small daughter, Nena, who was returning the following year to the city. Even Catriona came down from Brisbane as Lyndon's ship was not calling at that port. Mandy looked at them all and felt a great sadness. Lyndon appeared self-possessed, sophisticated, attractive, but Mandy sensed her reluctance to part from Caroline for so long. She fussed about the baby, told Barry she expected him to see Caroline got plenty of rest. 'And Caroline does not care particularly,' thought Mandy. 'She's sorry Lyndon is leaving but she does not need her any more. In some ways she'll be glad to have several thousands of miles of ocean between her and that absorbing affection. Does Lyndon know, I wonder.' She looked at the sister with whom she had so often disagreed and felt both sorry and glad for her. 'Her God seems to have had surer feet than mine,' she thought. 'She doesn't just talk about suffering humanity or cling to the dried out rags of an old-fashioned political party. She does something positive.' And she envied Lyndon her certainty, her belief in the resurrection of mankind. 'Even if half her promises are false,' she added mentally, 'even if you can't save the soul of mankind by unlimited social service.'

Nena stood on the outskirts, her eyes devouring Lyndon but her manner carefully remote. Nena was coming home, but she no longer had a home. She had no doubt hoped Lyndon would be waiting for her, re-^l and in affection by

her long absence, but Lyndon was going away. Mandy looked at the sister she loved best with sorrow in her heart. No final fulfilment of love for Nena, no reward for service but loneliness. 'You could have loved me,' she thought. 'I should have returned it,' but the very thought created in her a vague feeling of relief that no such emotional demands had been made upon her. She knew then with certainty that she would have betrayed Nena too. Perhaps Catriona might have supplied the family companionship that Nena craved, but as Mandy studied the two faces, Catriona's pretty, somewhat dissatisfied with the strictures and restrictions of middle-aged life, absorbed by material problems, income tax and unnecessary obsessions with economy, and the quiet ascetic self-contained face of Nena to whom even poverty was irrelevant, Mandy realised that here was no possibility of union. There never had been.

Finally they stood on the wharf as the boat drew away, felt the snap of the streamer and, even though she had not seen much of her for eighteen months, Mandy felt an overpowering desire to recall Lyndon, to reconstruct the past, the tangled family relationships, even the position of her beloved enemy. But the gulf of water widened irrevocably between them.

Now that the war had ended the pulse of life quickened. As the year drew to a close, the signs of change in her own department became apparent. No one seemed to know if they had any future. Mandy's problems were resolved by a letter from the university offering her a fellowship in English for the coming year. Her heart sang. Her future was ensured. Her emotional problems basked in the protection of Ben's steady affection while her old academic dream came true. A future of reading and study, a life's work. She showed the letter to Ben, stars in her eyes, and quickly penned a reply accepting the post. In Ben, she

could satisfy her craving for life, in the university her desire for a comfortable refuge from reality.

Ben congratulated her and Mandy was too enveloped by her own joy to perceive fully that he did not share her elation.

'You're sure you want it?' he said doubtfully.

'Of course,' said Mandy. 'It's one of the things I really want. Why shouldn't I want it?'

'I don't know,' said Ben. 'You're probably right, but it has always seemed to me a world remote from the essential patterns of living. But I'll probably feel better tomorrow. I'm just a little blue, that's all.'

In fact he was more than blue. He was moody. Mandy knew he was not happy at the prospects offering in his present law firm. He felt he had lost ground while in the army. She suspected a spark of jealousy in his reaction to her news, so she repressed her resentment at his lack of enthusiasm and tried to cheer him by an increased interest in his future.

One night as they lay side by side in the squeaky bed, he said:

'You won't lack company at the university, anyway.'

'Oh?'

'Lancing's accepted a fellowship in philosophy.'

Mandy felt her heart quicken its beat. Derek. She had not seen him properly for a year. They had passed in the street, said hullo in restaurants but their friends had contrived to prevent any more intimate meeting. She tried to decide if she were glad or sorry and her mind showed her she was unreservedly glad at the thought of his company. The prickles of excitement flowed along her skin. He was the unexpected, the temperamental, the vital.

'By the way,' said Ben, 'he's married.'

The warmth suffusing her body was chilled. She repressed

An exclamation of grief, tried to shut out the sensation of betrayal.

'No,' she said dully, 'he couldn't be. Not Elaine.'

'Yes, darling,' said Ben, laughing, not without triumph at the disbelief in her voice, 'Elaine it is.'

'I don't believe it,' said Mandy fiercely. 'He couldn't be such a fool. He didn't believe in marriage.'

'Of course,' said Ben, imitating Lancing's high-pitched drawl, 'it's simply a matter of convenience. An unfortunate situation forced upon them by the exigencies of society.'

'But Elaine!' said Mandy. 'She's such a dimwit.'

'Haven't you noticed,' said Ben dryly, 'that the Dereks always marry the Elaines? The apostles of freedom usually have wives that wait on them hand and foot. What's more his own mother was that type.'

'His mother,' said Mandy thoughtfully. 'I never met her.'

'No,' laughed Ben, 'I bet you didn't. You weren't mother's type and Derck knew it.'

'What about his father?'

'His father left home years ago. She always refused to divorce him.'

'He never told me that,' said Mandy.

'I'm not surprised,' said Ben. 'He has tried for years to forget about it.'

'In that case why marry Elaine?' 'She'll bore him stiff.'

'In that case,' laughed Ben, 'he'll probably follow father's course. But I don't know. The academic life has more opportunities for mutual escape. You can keep your wife in the background and devote yourself to research. Apart from meals you need never see her at all. The privilege of the scholar to silence is inviolable. An all-night party in your university room or an important paper keeping you away from home for twenty-four hours. How will she ever know?'

'You're a nasty cynic. If I know Elaine,' said Mandy maliciously, 'she'd be bound to find out.'

Mandy, in spite of her disappointment over Derek, was happy during this period. True, Ben's moodiness was depressing and she felt guilty at her own content but only on the edges of her being. She was too busy reading in preparation for her new job to feel too worried about another, and she knew again the immense pleasure that the study of literature always gave her.

Christmas passed without undue excitement and the New Year dawned full of promise. Then her new world crashed in ruins around her.

Early in January Ben came home early from the office, well before his usual hour. He kissed her quietly, said nothing but his regular hullo, she felt the suppressed nervousness in the embrace and the excitement warming his skin.

'What is it, Ben,' she cried, 'what's happened?'

'Good news,' he laughed, 'but it will keep until we've had a cup of coffee.'

Over his coffee he smiled shyly at her.

'Well, Mandy darling, our future is assured at last.'

For a moment she felt pleasure. His future held promise as well as hers after all. They could both face the new era with hope.

'They've made you a partner,' she said

'Don't be silly,' he laughed. 'I may be your husband, but old and respected city firms don't make young solicitors their partners.'

'You're going to be a barrister.'

'Wrong again. I have no aptitude on that side, sweetheart, and you know it.'

'Well, for heaven's sake,' she said in exasperation, 'get on and tell me.'

'I've bought a practice in Grafton,' he said triumphantly.

• 'There'll be one other partner but that's all. Mike Patterson's going in with me. We'll be independent.'

'Grafton?' she repeated incredulously.

'Yes, Grafton,' he laughed. 'Jacaranda trees, Clarence River. Nice town. You'll like it.'

'Me?' said Mandy tautly. 'And what makes you think I'll be going?'

He looked at her dumfounded.

'You're my wife,' he said.

'Your wife,' she replied, 'not your chattel. I suppose I wasn't even worth consulting about this.'

He looked apologetic.

'I didn't want to disappoint you,' he said, 'in case it fell through.'

'Disappoint me!' She struggled to keep the passion out of her voice but she did not succeed. 'Disappoint me? You mean you were too scared I'd squash the idea. What made you think I want to go to Grafton?'

'Why not?' he queried.

'Why not?' she answered. 'There's my new job. Everything.'

'It's only January,' he said. 'You'll have plenty of time to tell them before March. They'll get someone else.'

She stood up and smashed her coffee cup down on the table, shaking with rage.

'I have no desire to tell them,' she said fiercely. 'Get that into your thick skull. I thought you knew what this job meant to me.'

He spoke softly.

'I did think of it, honestly I did. I nearly said no for that reason but I realised I should be wronging both myself and our future relationship. In the final count your job can never be more than temporary.'

'Why not?' she asked icily. 'Do you think I'll fail?'

'Don't wilfully misunderstand me,' he said, angry at last. 'You're my wife, that's why. One day we'll have children, a home. It will be my duty to keep you, to provide for them.'

'The perfect husband,' she sneered. 'And what makes you think I couldn't keep them myself?'

'Because,' he said, 'to put it bluntly, you're a woman. Who's going to supply the food while you bear them? Do you think I'm going to stay home and feed the babies, wash the napkins?'

'All this is purely hypothetical,' she said. 'You're begging the question. We have no children.'

'But we will have children,' he answered, 'sooner or later, and when we do I want to be able to give them some sort of life.'

'Noble man. Not thinking of himself at all. Sacrificing me and him for our future offspring. Who says I'm going to have any?'

'Mandy,' he said quietly, 'have you forgotten that night in Hyde Park or the day on the beach at Southport. I asked you to marry me, not live with me.'

'Yes,' retorted Mandy. 'And you also said there was no reason why I should give up my own intellectual interests.'

'True,' he conceded.

'Well,' she said, 'that's just what you are asking me to do. And why? So that you may feel big and important, independent.'

'Mandy,' he said, 'I thought you wanted these things, too, a home of your own, children, all that. I thought you wanted to experience everything.'

'I do,' she said, 'but not yet. I've had no chance to live. You knew how much my new job meant to me.'

'More than me?' he queried finally.

'More than you!' she spat, determined to hurt him.

'I see,' he said. 'So I was only another refuge, was I, Mandy? An emotional shelter in the comfort of which your ambitions could be respectably realised. Legalised prostitution!' He picked up a newspaper lying on the bed. 'Last night you laughed at this with me.'

She glanced at the paragraph below his finger. It was headed: 'Any Woman of Determination Can Have a Career. Marriage no bar, says visiting American couple.'

'Last night,' went on Ben, 'you said they were cheating because they had no children. You said any woman could combine marriage and career if they were childless or dumped their progeny on some inoffensive grandmother. Remember?'

'Yes,' said Mandy stiffly, 'I remember. So what? We have no children. There's no need to go to Grafton now and you know it.'

'The opportunity may not come next year.'

'Really. Isn't that a pity? I should have thought these one-horse towns had permanent vacancies for bright young men. Well, my dear, if you must go now you'll be going alone.'

'Very well, Mandy,' he said. 'I'll go alone. Don't think I won't. Don't think I'm staying here to be walked up by you, to have my marriage and family dictated to me to conform with your whims. You know, when you married, all that was involved.'

'All right,' she said, beginning to sob. 'I knew. Derek warned me marriage was a trap. Why should the woman always give way? Why must I follow you all over the place like bloody Ruth? Why must your ambitions come first, not mine?'

'Because you're a woman,' he roared. 'whether you like it or not.'

'Go to hell!' she said.

She picked up her coat and purse and tied a scarf around her head. She opened the door.

'And stay there,' she added as she banged it.

'I will,' he returned through the closed door.

She walked furiously down to the tram-stop and boarded the first tram. It happened to be a *Bronze*. As it rattled on its bone-shaking way down the steep descent to the beach she fought back her tears, her anger. At the terminus she sat without moving, barely conscious of her surroundings until the conductor put his head around the door.

'We're here, lady. We'll be going back soon.'

'Thank you,' she muttered and hastily alighted.

The conductor shook his head. 'Looks odd,' he thought, 'but it's not my business.'

Outside there was a gale blowing. Dusk was already beginning to settle on the ocean. The sand along the beach was shadowed by late afternoon. She walked across the park towards the cliffs of Tamarama, felt the wind buffeting her face, listened to the satisfying crash of the surf on the heaped rock below.

The wildness of the evening suited her mood. She knew she had come to the point of no return. Whatever she decided now would determine the course of her life for ever. This was the real decision. There was no one to help her, no one to decide for her. Instinctively she knew she would return to him, go with him, but she struggled against the knowledge. Why should she keep the vows made before God a year ago? She resented him. She could understand his own need for fulfilment but she spurned his avowed motives. She did not believe he was as pure-minded as he thought. He had been nervous when he came home. He had not even consulted her. He was jealous, jealous of her success and deeper still, jealous of Lancing. He did not want her to work near him. She knew that now. He had always feared

him, her love for him. She had never given him an ultimately satisfactory answer to the question asked in Hyde Park and at Southport. He was making sure of her. Taking her away. Binding her to domesticity. Giving her no chance of escape. But she didn't have to go. She didn't.

Above the heights of the beach, she leant against the white railing while the wind swept through her and scrabbled into ridges the sand far below. There was no refuge, Ben said, not with him, and she knew in her heart he was right. 'To shield me from distress,' she added mentally. Distress. Wherever she went, whatever she loved, the recurring distress, the unvarying pattern of frustration. Her thoughts fled chaotically back to the past. The vases on the sideboard, always out of reach, the dog that died. The same feeling of despair melted her limbs. She beat her hands in a pointless tattoo on the railing beside her till the skin broke and splinters became embedded in her fingers. The pain stabbed with an old familiarity. The day after Ann died. That was it. The curious faces of the Southey children, the cold bitter May of 1902.

'Oh Mumma,' she sobbed. 'Why did you have to die? Why?' And the old sorrow, the deep regret tore again at her being with the searing sensation of loss renewed by her conviction that no one could comfort her now.

'Why do I cry for you,' she thought, 'you who have been dead so long? You could not help me, could you? That's an illusion of mine. You couldn't even save yourself or Reg or any of us.'

Above, the first stars began to appear and she thought how once they had meant God, God who had filled the empty space left by Ann. Instead of the wind-swept beach, she saw the Hawkesbury awakening to the morning light, heard the soft persistent voice of Mary and she remembered her fear that God would die. Well, He had died, hadn't He.

Only sometimes she wondered if perhaps she had died, not God. Yet she no longer desired the comforts of eternal life, the ethic that excused God the murder of a universe provided it could guarantee a personal salvation.

'We are wrong there too,' she thought. 'It is presumption to excuse God anything. Humanity robs Him of strength, of divinity. They have created God in their own image. O God our help. Abide with me, the eternal refuge, the maternal womb of babyhood.'

'But I don't want it,' she said aloud with conviction, 'I don't want a God who is an evasion of life. God is not sleep or slumber or forgetfulness. He is life not death. There is no salvation of souls, only the fight with the living. Poverty, misery. You cannot escape responsibility, Mandy, however hard you try.'

She picked up a stone and dropped it over the railing and heard it plonk silently on the rocks far below.

'That,' she thought, 'is the reverberation of our free-thinking. A silent plonk of stone against the walls of an unyielding universe, our attempt to escape life in promiscuity and alcohol. 'My God,' she thought, 'must mankind forever murder its gods? Why couldn't the Christians concern themselves with living rather than dying, why couldn't the free-thinkers use their knowledge to grapple with the real world instead of running away from it?'

'But there is still an honourable avenue of escape, a place where I can preserve my own self-integrity outside the agony of love.'

For a second she looked in the door of the scholastic castle, the ivory tower that had the power to bind her with a spell more potent than that cast on the sleeping beauty. She had only to renounce Ben, the fertile universe, to find a haven. A life spent in the dream world of thoughts and phrases, the creators of which were long since dead. If she

left Ben now, this world was hers; but there could be no turning back. And she knew with certainty, in that moment, that she could not take it. Perhaps for some it could mean fulfilment, but she felt that for her its fruits would be ashes, its towers would crumble to dust as she wakened. Cutting across all her desires flitted the elusive sense of life, that haunting pervading feeling that coloured her entire existence. And its roots were in love. Even for Derek she had been unable to envisage the destruction of embryonic life. Not even for religion could she renounce the world. Its perpetuation, its recreation was her Grail, the garden at Fernleigh, the peach trees, the sweet scented pittosporum, the raindrops slung across the wire, Vicky, Nena, Reg - love . . . Perhaps his horses had galloped home after all, his tickets won a prize.

She was a woman, said Ben. Her fate had been written from her conception in the union of Ann and Reg. She would write to the professor tomorrow, tell him she could not come because her husband, her sex, her family, her whole life conspired against her, drew her away from the closed room of scholarship into the broader world of light, of sun, or living. But she felt no confidence in the future, no conviction that Ben would not become increasingly absorbed in his own pursuits, more blind to hers, no belief that her life would be any more satisfying than Catriona's, any less disappointing than Nena's. It had to be lived, that was all. There were no more refuges, nowhere she could escape the impact and demands of emotion, the tyranny of hate and love. Lyndon had been hate, Ann love. Ben completed the cycle. She accepted him but she rejected him. She could not live without him, but at the same time she was conscious of a new coldness in herself towards him, the birth of a new, self-contained independent being. Yet it was, after all, an old being. It was simply, there was no longer any

dichotomy of emotion. In her new relation to Ben were all the loves and hates, the desires and resentments, the bondage and freedom that had tormented her since birth.

She pulled the scarf closer around her head to keep out the bite of the southerly, and walked slowly across the park to catch the tram back.